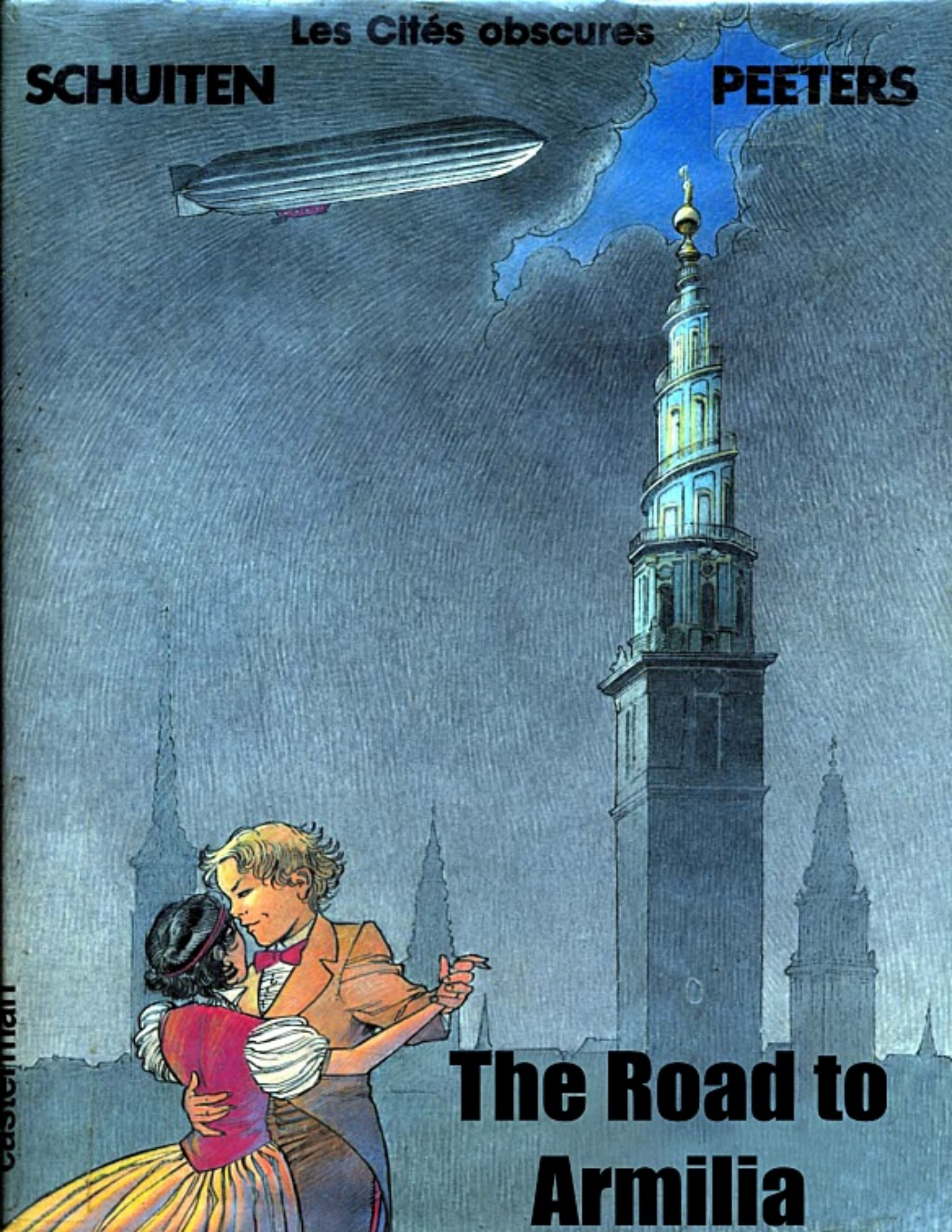


Les Cités obscures

SCHUITEN

PEETERS



**The Road to
Armilia**

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Les cités obscures

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LE MYSTERE D'URBICANDE (épuisé)

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Ed. Yellow now

Les Cités obscures

SCHUITEN

PEETERS

The Road to Armilia



Scanned by ?
Translated by Joe Johnson
Lettered by Nicolai

casterman



IT'S BEEN GOING ON FOR TOO LONG. I SAW THE LAST FEW DAYS' FIGURES: THEY'RE WORSE THAN EVER...A LITTLE MORE AND OUR UNIT WILL BE DOWNGRADED.



NEVERTHELESS, I ASSURE YOU THAT...



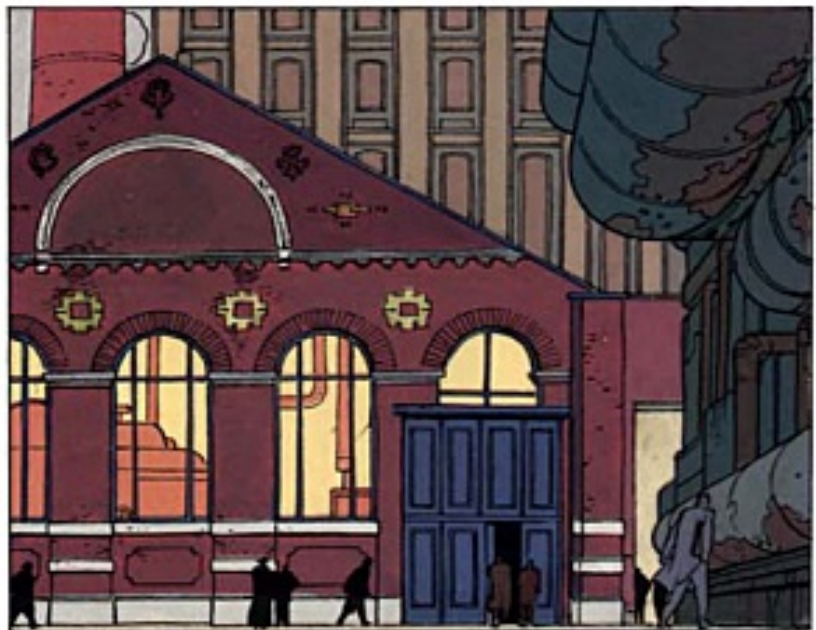
A RENEWAL OF CONTROL IS ALL THAT'S REQUIRED. IF THINGS AREN'T STRAIGHTENED OUT SOON, WE'LL BE THE ONES HAVING PROBLEMS.

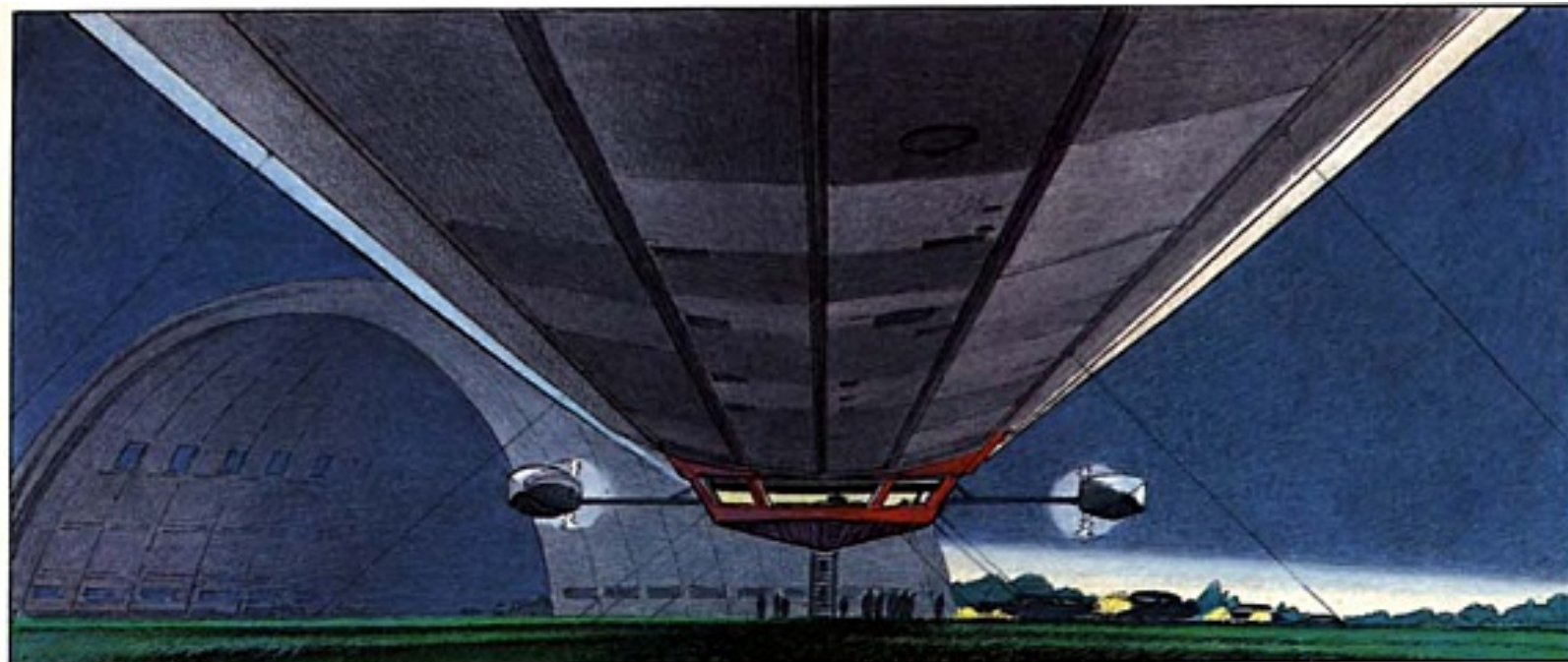


TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH, I ALREADY HAVE SOME SUSPICIONS...



WELL, WELL, WE'LL JUST SEE!





THURSDAY, MAY 25TH,
9 IN THE EVENING.

AT LAST! WE'RE FINALLY UNDERWAY. AROUND SEVEN THIS MORNING, THE SINISTER WESTERN WIND THAT WAS PREVENTING US FROM LIFTING OFF FOR FIVE DAYS BEGAN TO DIE DOWN.

NONETHELESS, COMMANDANT MOLTCHANOV WAS STILL HESITANT TO GIVE THE DEPARTURE SIGNAL.

"THE BREAK SEEMS FRAGILE TO ME. IT'S LIKELY TO BE OF ONLY A SHORT DURATION. I WOULD PREFER A MORE CLEAR-CUT IMPROVEMENT..."

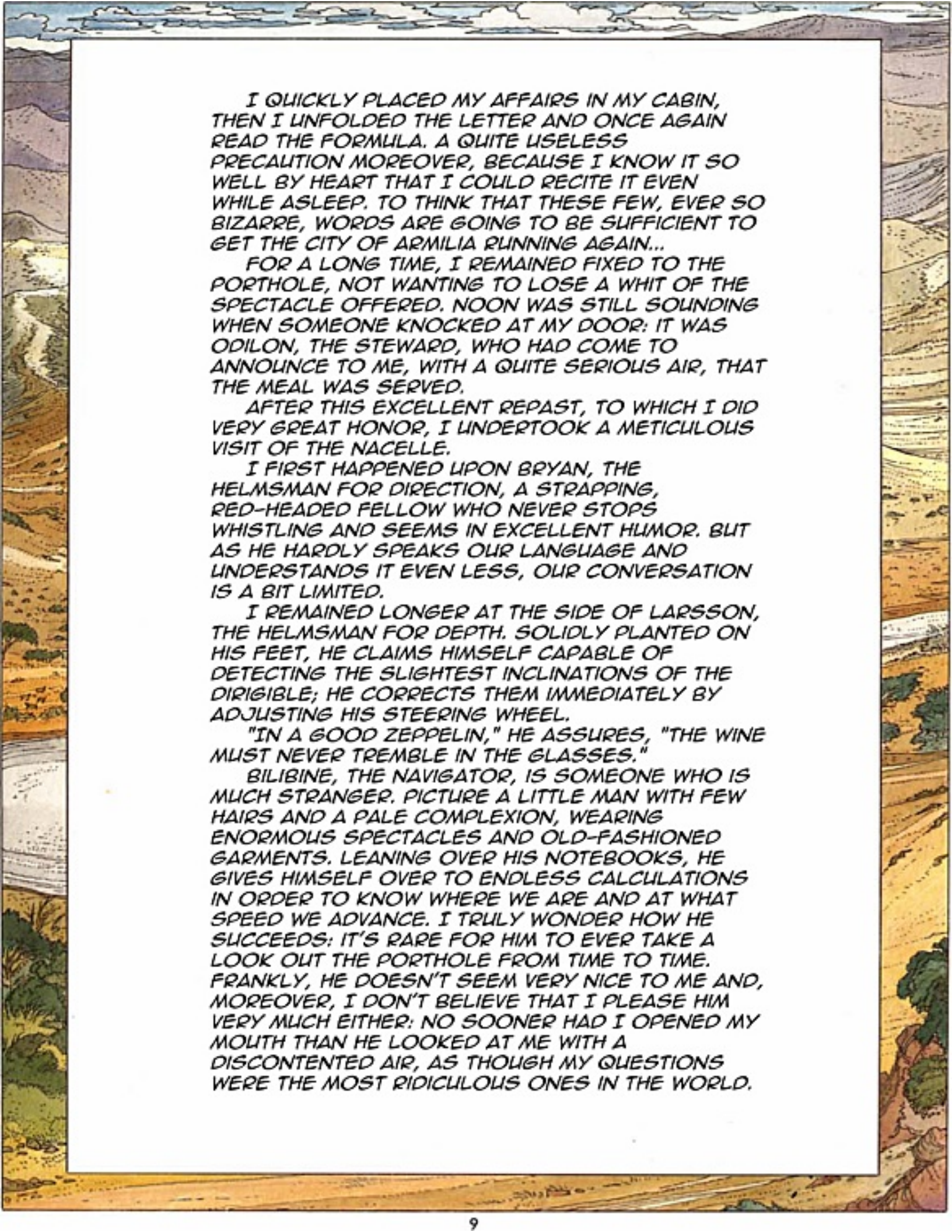
"COMMANDANT," I ANSWERED HIM IN A SERIOUS VOICE, "AT THE OTHER END OF THE WORLD, LOST IN THE COLD AND DESOLATION, MEN ARE AWAITING THE MESSAGE THAT WILL DELIVER THEM. ANY ADDITIONAL DELAY COULD BE FATAL TO THEM."

AS THOUGH TO UNDERSCORE MY WORDS, A SUNBEAM CAME AT THAT INSTANT, STRIKING THE ZEPPELIN. THE COMMANDANT GAVE THE ORDER TO CAST OFF. IN THE SPACE OF A FEW MINUTES, EVERYONE WAS AT THEIR POST.

THE AIRSHIP LIFTED OFF IN SUCH SILENCE THAT IT DIDN'T EVEN STIR THE SHEEP GRAZING ON THE LAWN. AND MYSELF, I ONLY REALIZED THAT WE WERE EN ROUTE WHEN I SAW THE PEOPLE AND HOUSES RAPIDLY SHRINKING...

I WAS EXPECTING A FEW MORE SENSATIONS. LET'S HOPE THAT THIS TRIP WILL NOT BE TOO TRANQUIL!





I QUICKLY PLACED MY AFFAIRS IN MY CABIN, THEN I UNFOLDED THE LETTER AND ONCE AGAIN READ THE FORMULA. A QUITE USELESS PRECAUTION MOREOVER, BECAUSE I KNOW IT SO WELL BY HEART THAT I COULD RECITE IT EVEN WHILE ASLEEP. TO THINK THAT THESE FEW, EVER SO BIZARRE, WORDS ARE GOING TO BE SUFFICIENT TO GET THE CITY OF ARMILIA RUNNING AGAIN...

FOR A LONG TIME, I REMAINED FIXED TO THE PORTHOLE, NOT WANTING TO LOSE A WHIT OF THE SPECTACLE OFFERED. NOON WAS STILL SOUNDING WHEN SOMEONE KNOCKED AT MY DOOR: IT WAS ODILON, THE STEWARD, WHO HAD COME TO ANNOUNCE TO ME, WITH A QUITE SERIOUS AIR, THAT THE MEAL WAS SERVED.

AFTER THIS EXCELLENT REPAST, TO WHICH I DID VERY GREAT HONOR, I UNDERTOOK A METICULOUS VISIT OF THE NACELLE.

I FIRST HAPPENED UPON BRYAN, THE HELMSMAN FOR DIRECTION, A STRAPPING, RED-HEADED FELLOW WHO NEVER STOPS WHISTLING AND SEEMS IN EXCELLENT HUMOR. BUT AS HE HARDLY SPEAKS OUR LANGUAGE AND UNDERSTANDS IT EVEN LESS, OUR CONVERSATION IS A BIT LIMITED.

I REMAINED LONGER AT THE SIDE OF LARSSON, THE HELMSMAN FOR DEPTH. SOLIDLY PLANTED ON HIS FEET, HE CLAIMS HIMSELF CAPABLE OF DETECTING THE SLIGHTEST INCLINATIONS OF THE DIRIGIBLE; HE CORRECTS THEM IMMEDIATELY BY ADJUSTING HIS STEERING WHEEL.

"IN A GOOD ZEPPELIN," HE ASSURES, "THE WINE MUST NEVER TREMBLE IN THE GLASSES."

BILIBINE, THE NAVIGATOR, IS SOMEONE WHO IS MUCH STRANGER. PICTURE A LITTLE MAN WITH FEW HAIRS AND A PALE COMPLEXION, WEARING ENORMOUS SPECTACLES AND OLD-FASHIONED GARMENTS. LEANING OVER HIS NOTEBOOKS, HE GIVES HIMSELF OVER TO ENDLESS CALCULATIONS IN ORDER TO KNOW WHERE WE ARE AND AT WHAT SPEED WE ADVANCE. I TRULY WONDER HOW HE SUCCEEDS: IT'S RARE FOR HIM TO EVER TAKE A LOOK OUT THE PORTHOLE FROM TIME TO TIME. FRANKLY, HE DOESN'T SEEM VERY NICE TO ME AND, MOREOVER, I DON'T BELIEVE THAT I PLEASE HIM VERY MUCH EITHER: NO SOONER HAD I OPENED MY MOUTH THAN HE LOOKED AT ME WITH A DISCONTENTED AIR, AS THOUGH MY QUESTIONS WERE THE MOST RIDICULOUS ONES IN THE WORLD.



FIRST DAY
DINNER

TOMATO WITH SHRIMP
ROAST CHICKEN
FRENCH FRIES
CHOCOLATE CAKE
STRAWBERRIES WITH
WHIPPED CREAM
BANANA SPLIT



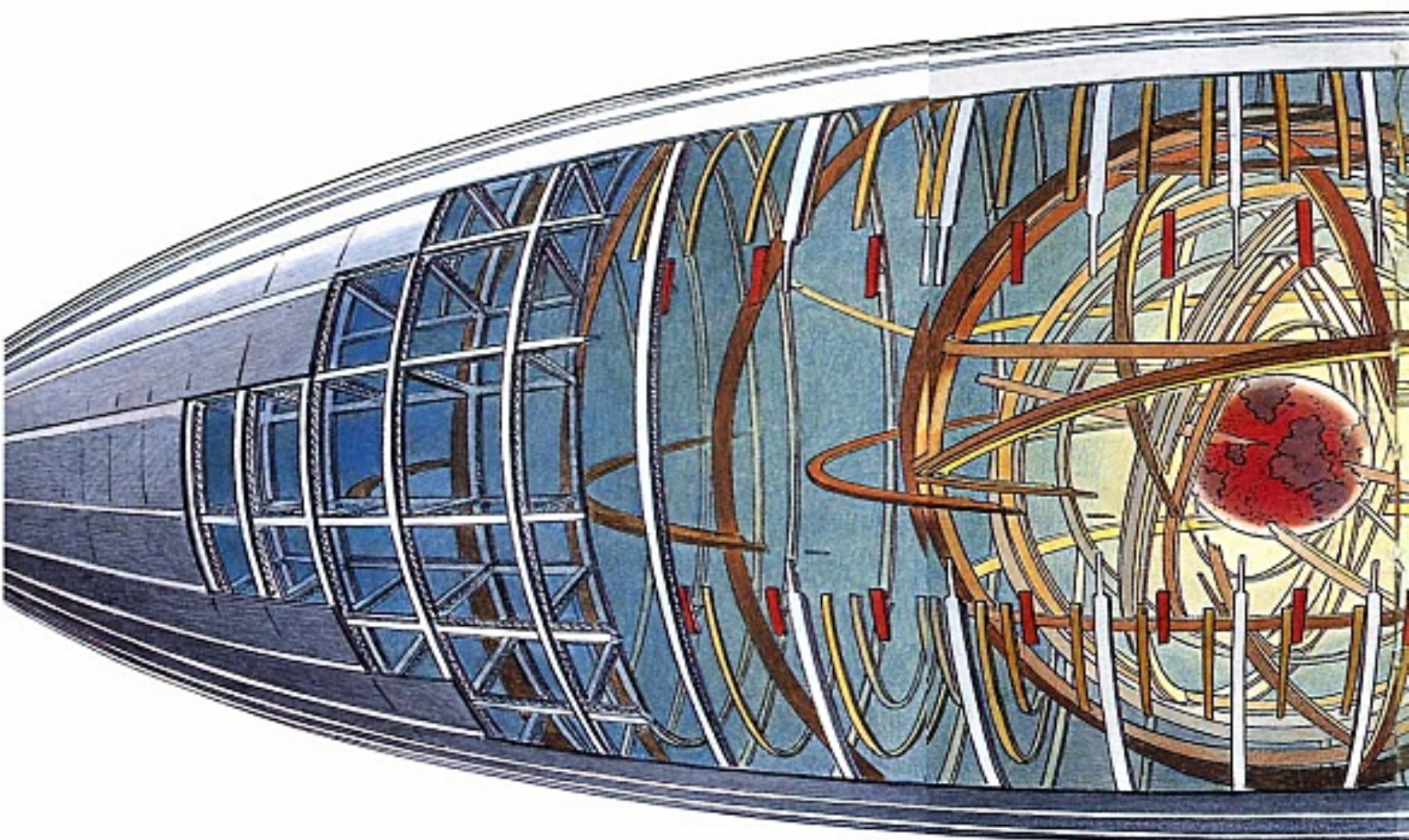
A SHORT WHILE AGO, COMMANDANT MOLTCHANOV AND I DINED ALONE TOGETHER. AND, WHILE THE MOST DELICIOUS FOODS FOLLOWED ONE AFTER THE OTHER, HE EXPLAINED TO ME IN DETAIL THE ITINERARY THAT WE ARE GOING TO FOLLOW TO REACH ARMILIA.

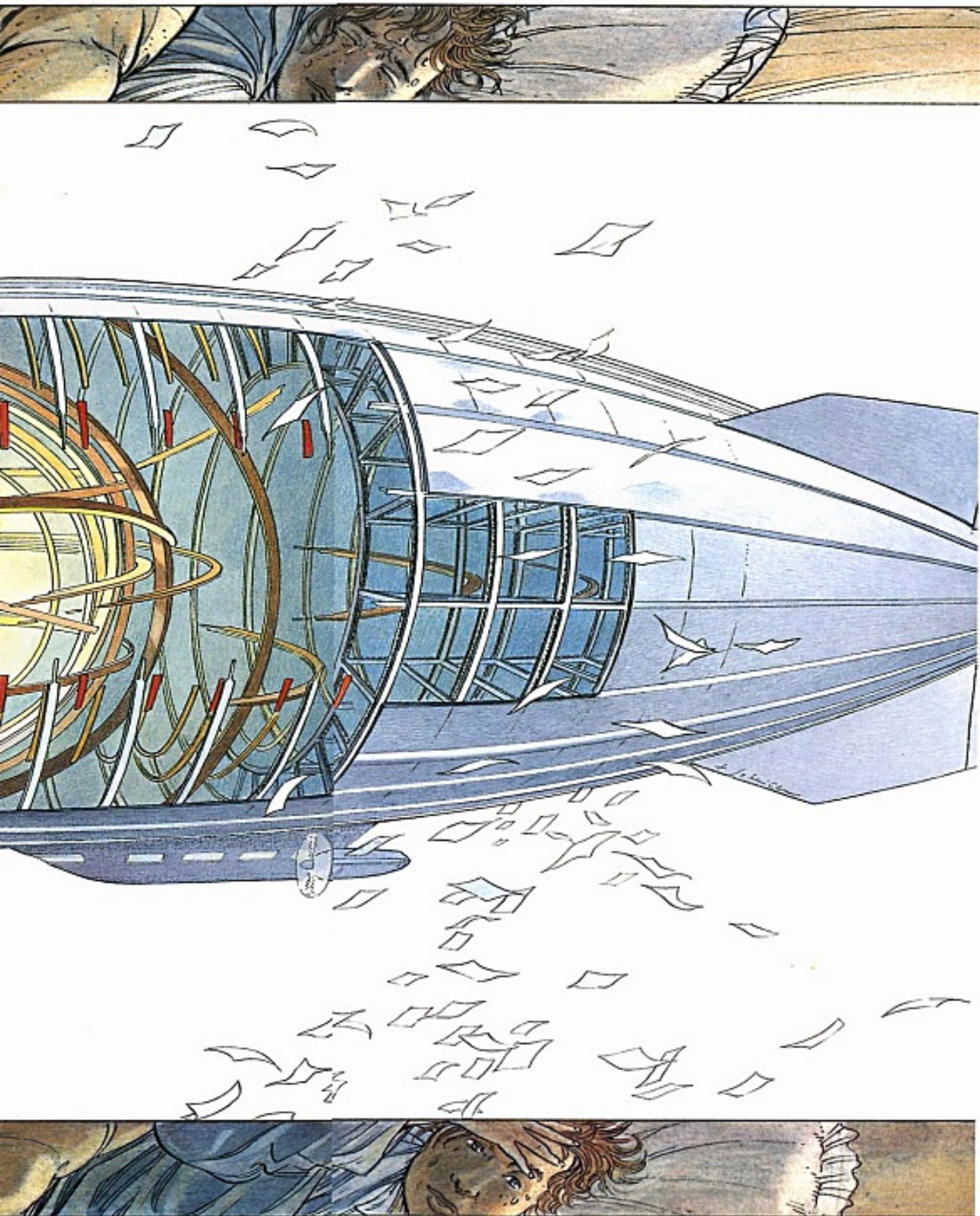
"AS OF TOMORROW, WE'LL REACH PORRENTUUY, A LITTLE TOWN, BUT REMARKABLE FOR MORE THAN ONE REASON...THEN IT WILL BE MUHKA WHERE WE'LL HAVE A BRIEF TECHNICAL LAYOVER. AND IF ALL GOES WELL, SATURDAY WE'LL PASS OVER BRYSEL. THEN IT WILL BE BAYREUTH, CALVANI, GENOVA AND OF COURSE K. BENHAVN..."

"WHAT A SHAME IT IS TO NOT BE ABLE TO STOP IN EACH OF THESE CITIES!"

"NOT AT ALL, YOU WILL SEE THEM MUCH BETTER THAN IF YOU WERE WALKING THERE. WHEN FLYING OVER THEM, WE WILL REDUCE OUR SPEED AND ALTITUDE IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SPECTACLE...TRUST ME, FERDINAND, NO MEANS OF TRANSPORT EQUALS THE ZEPPELIN AND NONE WILL EVER SURPASS IT! AS COMFORTABLE AS THE BEST OCEAN-LINERS, BUT BY FAR MORE RAPID, HAVING NO NEED OF A ROAD, OF A RAIL, NOR EVEN OF A TRUE PORT, AS MUCH AT EASE ABOVE FIELDS AS ABOVE CITIES, OCEANS AS MOUNTAINS, THE DIRIGIBLE IS THE KING OF VEHICLES. BELIEVE YOU ME, EVER SINCE HIS LORDSHIP THE COUNT DID ME THE HONOR OF CALLING ME TO HIS SIDE, NOTHING HAS BEEN ABLE TO DISTRACT ME FROM THESE ENGINES! OUR CAUSE, MOREOVER, CONTINUES TO GAIN GROUND. TWENTY YEARS AGO PEOPLE LAUGHED WHEN YOU MENTIONED THE WORD DIRIGIBLE. NOW, NOT A DAY PASSES WITHOUT AIRSHIPS FINDING NEW CONVERTS.

WHILE HE WAS TALKING TO ME, I COULD SEE THE SETTING OF THE SUN ON THE FORESTS OF MEGARA. AH, HOW I FEEL THAT THIS VOYAGE IS GOING TO PLEASE ME!





FRIDAY, MAY 26TH,
8 IN THE MORNING.

I HAD A SINGLE REGRET YESTERDAY EVENING, THAT OF HAVING VISITED ONLY THE NACELLE OF THE SHIP. EACH TIME THAT I ASKED TO SEE THE REST, I WAS TOLD THAT IT PRESENTED NO INTEREST.

"THE REST?...OH, BUT IT'S NOTHING! A SIMPLE CARCASS OF METAL, OF CANVAS, OF GAS...NOTHING, REALLY NOTHING SPECIAL,"

BUT I WAS WELL AWARE THAT IT WAS FALSE AND THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR THIS IMMENSE APPARATUS TO BE ONLY A MASS OF SCRAP IRON.

AND TONIGHT, I SAW IT. YES, SAW WITH MY OWN EYES.

IN AN INSTANT, THE FUSELAGE OPENED AND THE INTERIOR OF THE MACHINE APPEARED UNTO ME. THE WHOLE CENTER WAS TAKEN UP BY A GIGANTIC SPHERE, SO LUMINOUS THAT IT AT FIRST BLINDED ME. THE SPHERE WAS FORMED OF CIRCLES AND RINGS SPINNING WITH A MAD ENERGY. BUT SUDDENLY, I HEARD A MUFFLED BELL AND EVERYTHING STOPPED.

AFTER A MOMENT, GREAT SHEETS OF PAPER BEGAN TO RISE IN THE DIRECTION OF THE MACHINE. ONE MIGHT HAVE SAID THE PAGES OF A BOOK IF THEY HADN'T BEEN COMPLETELY WHITE. THEY WERE CLIMBING, EVER MORE NUMEROUS, AND SOON EVERYTHING BECAME WHITE.

I AWOKE IN A SWEAT.

I HAVE TO GET THIS OFF MY MIND. I HAVE TO GO INTO THE FUSELAGE.



FRIDAY, MAY 26TH,
11 IN THE MORNING

AN INCREDIBLE EVENT TOOK PLACE RECENTLY, SO INCREDIBLE EVEN THAT I DON'T KNOW HOW TO TELL OF IT.

JUST AFTER BREAKFAST, WHILE WE WERE PASSING UNDER THE FAMOUS ARCHES OF PORRENTREUY, I CROSSED THE NACELLE, PAYING ATTENTION TO MAKE NO NOISE. BY HAPPENSTANCE, THE DOOR TO THE INTERIOR OF THE FUSELAGE WASN'T LOCKED. I OPENED IT WITH A TREMBLING HAND.



AT FIRST I WAS HORRIBLY DISAPPOINTED. NOTHING IN THE SAD CARCASS RESEMBLED MY DREAM: THERE WERE ONLY CRISS-CROSSING GIRDERS AS FAR AS THE EYE COULD SEE.

AN ABRUPT CREAK MADE ME TURN AROUND. A BIRD, I THOUGHT, HE MUST'VE GOTTEN CAUGHT IN THE CANVAS. OR PERHAPS A RAT, AND IN THAT CASE HE'LL HAVE TO BE GOTTEN RID OF BEFORE HE DOES ANY DAMAGE.

I PULLED OUT SOME BUNDLES AND LIFTED THE HEAVY CANVAS. SINCE THE THING WAS ATTEMPTING TO ESCAPE, I TRAPPED IT WITH A FIRM HAND.

I DISCOVERED A YOUNG GIRL, HER EYES BULGING WITH TERROR.

"OH SIR...SIR...DON'T KILL ME!"



"KILL YOU? COME NOW, YOU'RE SURELY JOKING...INSTEAD, TELL ME WHAT YOUR NAME IS!"

"HELLA...HELLA JACOBSEN..."

"WELL, HELLO HELLA! MY NAME IS FERDINAND ROBLUR HATTERAS. IF YOU LIKE, YOU MAY CALL ME FERDINAND...NOW, MAY I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING ON BOARD THIS DIRIGIBLE AND HOW YOU GOT IN?"

THE CHILD RAISED HER HEAD. SHE WAS PRETTIER THAN I HAD AT FIRST BELIEVED.

"I WAS WORKING AT THE DINESEN PLANTS," SHE BEGAN WITH A WEAK VOICE, "IN THE FACTORY WHERE THE CANVAS FOR THESE DIRIGIBLES IS PREPARED..."

"WHAT? A CHILD YOUR AGE WORKING IN THE FACTORIES..."

"BUT OF COURSE, SIR. THERE ARE ONLY CHILDREN IN THE GUT SECTION.

"BUT NOW! WHAT IS ALL THIS?"

"WELL, GUT THAT'S WHAT...BEEF INTESTINES! IT'S WITH THIS THAT THE LINEN MUST BE DOUBLED TO MAKE IT SOLID. BUT BEFORE THAT, WHAT WORK! THESE INTESTINES FIRST HAVE TO BE SCRAPED, THEN THEY ARE DAMPENED WITH SALT WATER SO THEY WILL SOFTEN...THE WORST PART IS THE ODOR. WHATEVER YOU DO, IT CONTINUES TO STICK TO YOUR HANDS.

"ALL THAT DOES NOT TELL ME HOW YOU CAME HERE," I ANSWERED IN A VOICE THAT I WANTED TO BE VERY CHILL.

"I HAD BEEN TRYING TO ESCAPE FOR MONTHS. WITH STINA, MY NEIGHBOR, WE NEVER STOPPED MAKING PLANS. WE WERE TO LEAVE TOGETHER, BUT AT THE LAST SECOND SHE GOT AFRAID AND GAVE UP ON RUNNING AWAY..."

"AND YOU, HOW DID YOU DO SO?"

"EACH DIRIGIBLE CARRIES A PROVISION OF CANVAS FOR REPAIRS. IT'S IN THAT CANVAS THAT I LET MYSELF BE ROLLED UP. I WAS TAKEN ON AT THE SAME TIME AS THE OTHER ROLLS."

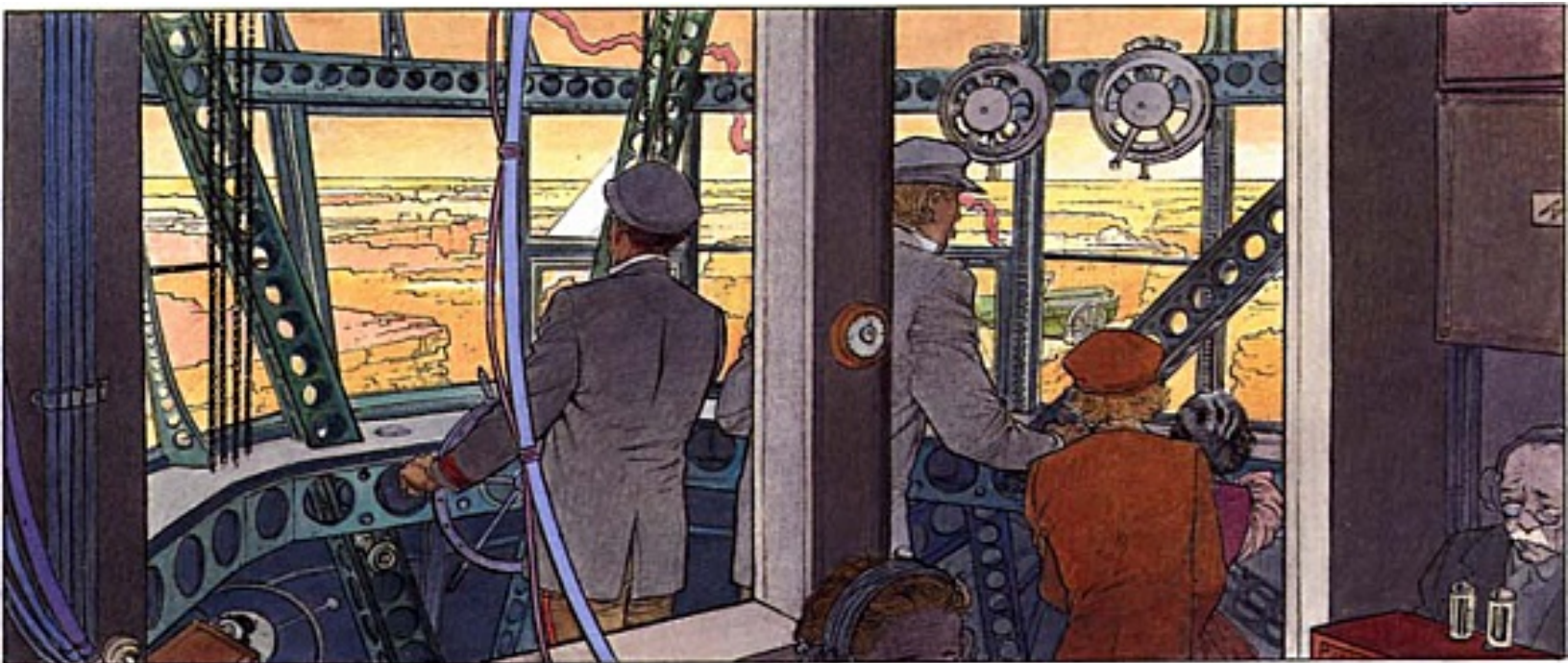
"BUT...THAT MUST HAVE BEEN AWFULLY UNCOMFORTABLE!"

"OH...THAT'S NOTHING...I WAS SO HAPPY TO HAVE ESCAPED."

"HELLA, YOUR NIGHTMARE IS OVER. FROM NOW ON, YOU ARE MY GUEST ON BOARD THIS AIRCRAFT. I WILL ASK THE COMMANDANT AND THE CREW TO TREAT YOU ACCORDINGLY... COME, I'M GOING TO SHOW YOU THE NACELLE..."

CROSSING THE DINING ROOM, SHE RUSHED OVER TO AN APPLE AND ATE IT GREEDILY. A BIT EMBARRASSED, I UNDERSTOOD THAT SHE MUST BE DEAD FROM HUNGER AND I ASKED ODILON TO SERVE HER A MEAL. IN THE SPACE OF A FEW MINUTES, SHE EMPTIED THE CONTENTS OF FOUR PLATES.

WHEN I HAD APPRISED HIM OF THE SITUATION, THE COMMANDANT SEEMED A BIT SURPRISED, BUT MADE NOT THE LEAST REMARK. HELLA WOULD SHARE MY CABIN FOR THE DURATION OF THIS VOYAGE.



FRIDAY, MAY 26TH,
A QUARTER TO 9 IN THE EVENING.

TOWARDS THE END OF LUNCH, WHILE HELLA WAS ASKING ME A THOUSAND QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DIRIGIBLE, THE COMMANDANT'S VOICE SUDDENLY RANG OUT.

"FERDINAND! FERDINAND! COME AND SEE!"

WE RAN UP TO THE PILOT STATION.

"WILL YOU LOOK AT THAT!" SAID THE COMMANDANT. "HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ANYTHING SO BIZARRE?"

BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES OF THE CANYON, AN ENORMOUS VESSEL ON WHEELS WAS SLOWLY ADVANCING, A SORT OF MONSTROUS LINER LOST IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DESERT. THE MACHINE MUST HAVE BEEN IN A BAD WAY: A SMOKE SIGNAL OF DISTRESS WAS COMING OUT OF IT.

"SO, BILIBINE, WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO SAY?" QUERIED THE COMMANDANT.

"I'M RECEIVING THEM QUITE BADLY. THEIR RADIO MUST BE SCRAMBLED. THE ONLY CLEAR THING IS THAT THEY NEED ASSISTANCE. BUT AS FOR WHAT THEY NEED, IT WILL BE NECESSARY TO SEND SOMEONE DOWN TO THEM..."

"IF YOU WILL PERMIT IT, COMMANDANT, I WILL MYSELF GO DOWN TO THIS VESSEL.

"WELL, FERDINAND, I DO NOT REALLY KNOW IF YOUR UNCLE..."

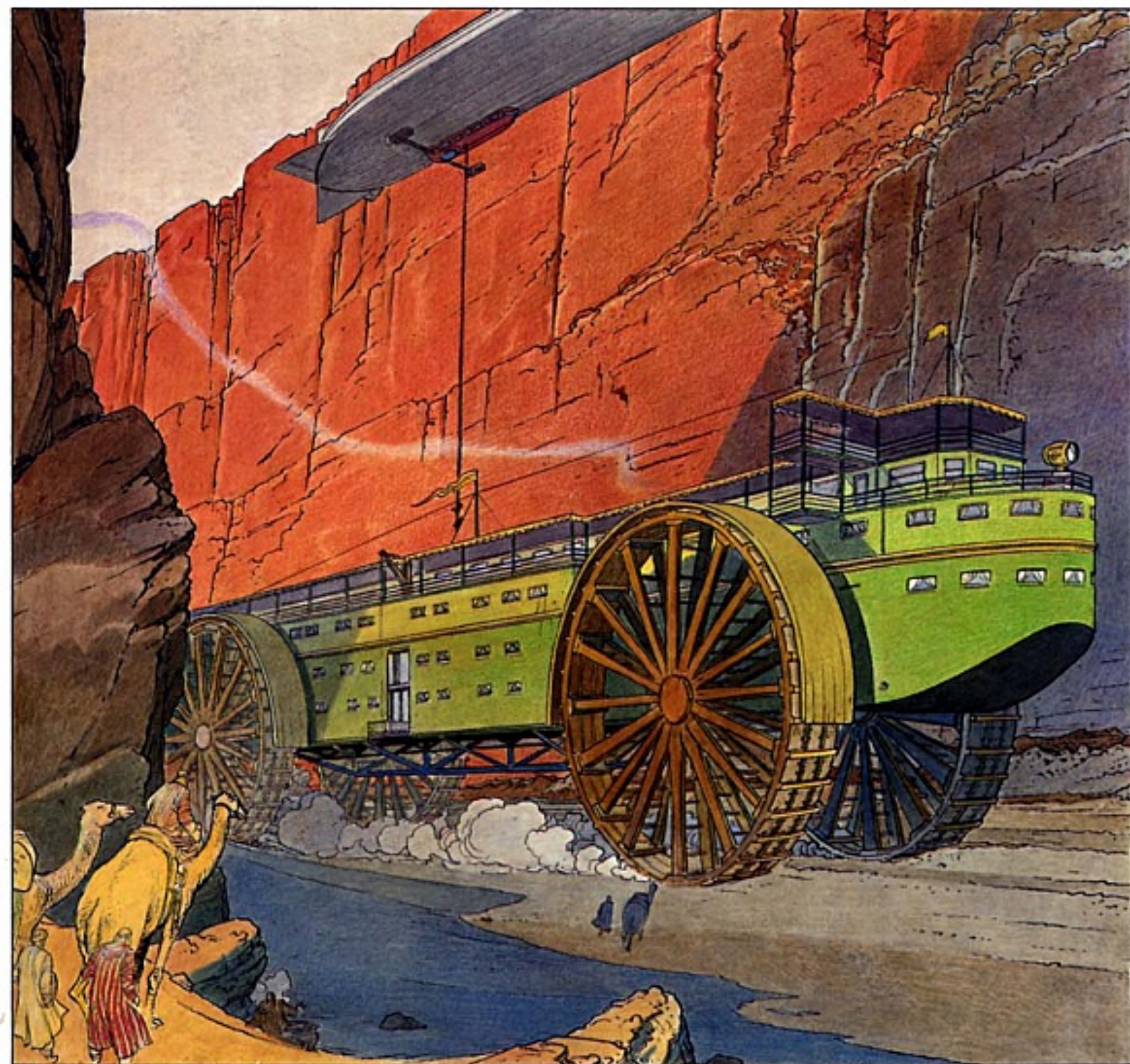
"MY UNCLE WOULD SURELY AGREE. ANYTHING NEW PLEASES HIM."

"I'M COMING WITH YOU, FERDINAND," DECLARED HELLA IN A TONE THAT BROOKED NO REPLY.

THE VESSEL WAS SO SLOW THAT WE HAD ALREADY CAUGHT UP WITH IT. THE ZEPPELIN STATIONED ITSELF JUST OVER IT AND BRYAN UNROLLED THE SLENDER CORD LADDER.

THE IMMENSE VOID OPENED BEFORE ME. I FELT A SLEIGHT STINGING IN MY CHEST. HERE WE GO, NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO BACK OFF!

I TOOK THE LADDER IN HAND AND BEGAN TO DESCEND. A HEAVY AND BURNING ATMOSPHERE ENVELOPED MY ENTIRE BODY. THERE WASN'T A WISP OF WIND.





THE PROMENADE DECK WAS DESERTED, AS THOUGH HASTILY ABANDONED. FROM THE LOWER LEVEL WE COULD HEAR MUSIC AND NOISY BURSTS OF LAUGHTER.

THE SPECTACLE BEFORE US AT THE FOOT OF THE STAIRS WAS RATHER RIDICULOUS. BUT ALL THOSE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN WATCHED IT WITH THE CLOSEST ATTENTION: ONE MIGHT HAVE SAID THAT THEY HAD NEVER SEEN ANYTHING MORE INTERESTING.



NONE OF THOSE WHOM WE ASKED WAS AWARE OF THE SHIP'S DIFFICULTIES. ALL LAUGHED AND DRANK MERRILY, ENCHANTED WITH THEIR CRUISE.

"PROBLEMS? DO YOU HEAR, CHARLES? THESE CHILDREN ARE ASKING US IF THERE ARE ANY PROBLEMS..."

FINALLY THE STEWARD CAME UP TO US.

"YOU ARE LOOKING FOR THESE GENTLEMEN, I BELIEVE...THEY ARE ON THE LOWER LEVEL, IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE SUITE. IT'S THE THIRD DOOR ON THE LEFT."

WE HAD TO KNOCK ON THE DOOR SEVERAL TIMES BEFORE THERE WAS ANY REACTION. WE ENCOUNTERED SIX OLD FELLOWS, DRESSED MUCH TOO WARMLY AND SEEMING VERY ANNOYED.



"THANK YOU FOR HAVING RESPONDED SO QUICKLY TO OUR CALL," BEGAN THE TALL BEARDED ONE IN A GRAVE VOICE. ALLOW ME TO PRESENT TO YOU: LOUIS FOREST, FROM THE INTERURBAN COMPANY OF PROGRESS. AND HERE ARE MY COLLEAGUES: HIS EXCELLENCY GUSTAVE POIRIER, THE PREFECT OF COMMUNICATIONS, MR. EDOUARD LABEY, THE HONORARY PRESIDENT OF THE FUNDS FOR EXPLOITATION OF THE SOMONITES, MR. GILDAS TREGOMAIN, THE DELEGATED ADMINISTRATOR OF THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OF ALAXIS, MR. REGIS DE BROK, DEAN OF THE ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF BRYSEL...AND LASTLY, STANDING BEHIND ME, MR. WAPPENDORF, THE INVENTOR OF THIS...HMM...OF THIS....'SUPERVEHICLE'".

"A BRILLIANT IDEA YOU'VE HAD HERE, MR. WAPPENDORF," DECLARED THE PREFECT. "YOUR DESERT VESSEL IS A BAD JOKE AND THIS TRIAL RUN A LAMENTABLE FAILURE. THINK WHAT THEY'LL SAY IN THE PRESS! ONCE AGAIN, WE'LL BE THE LAUGHINGSTOCK OF THE CITY."

"DO YOU REALIZE," CONTINUED HIS NEIGHBOR IN A FRAIL VOICE, "THAT THIS PERSON WANTED TO HAVE US TRAVERSE THE NEPTUNIC OCEAN ON THIS RAFT..."

"A RAFT!" REPEATED WAPPENDORF IN A INDEFINABLE ACCENT. "ON THAT, GENTLEMEN, I WILL STOP YOU IMMEDIATELY...I AM THE FIRST TO RECOGNIZE THAT THIS INAUGURAL PASSAGE HAS MADE CLEAR CERTAIN MINOR IMPERFECTIONS, ESPECIALLY CONCERNING THE RADAR. BUT I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO INSULT ME...I DO NOT UNDERSTAND, GENTLEMEN, HOW WE CAN TURN OUR BACKS ON THE FUTURE. THE YOUNG WILL UNDERSTAND ME, I AM SURE."

AND HE APPROACHED US:

"WE'RE FROM ALAXIS. WE HAVE CLEARED ALMOST WITHOUT INCIDENT THE DESERT OF THE SOMONITES, HAVE CROSSED P...HRY TO CHEERS AND WE ARE READYING OURSELVES TO REJOIN THE SEA WHERE THIS VESSEL WILL REVEAL ALL OF ITS AMPHIBIOUS POSSIBILITIES."

"DON'T COUNT ON ME FOR THAT," REPLIED THE ELDEST. "I'M GETTING OFF AT MUKHA IN ONE PIECE! DO YOU HEAR, WAPPENDORF?"

"EXCUSE ME," I SAID IN A STRONG VOICE, "BUT COULD WE KNOW EXACTLY WHAT IS YOUR PROBLEM?"

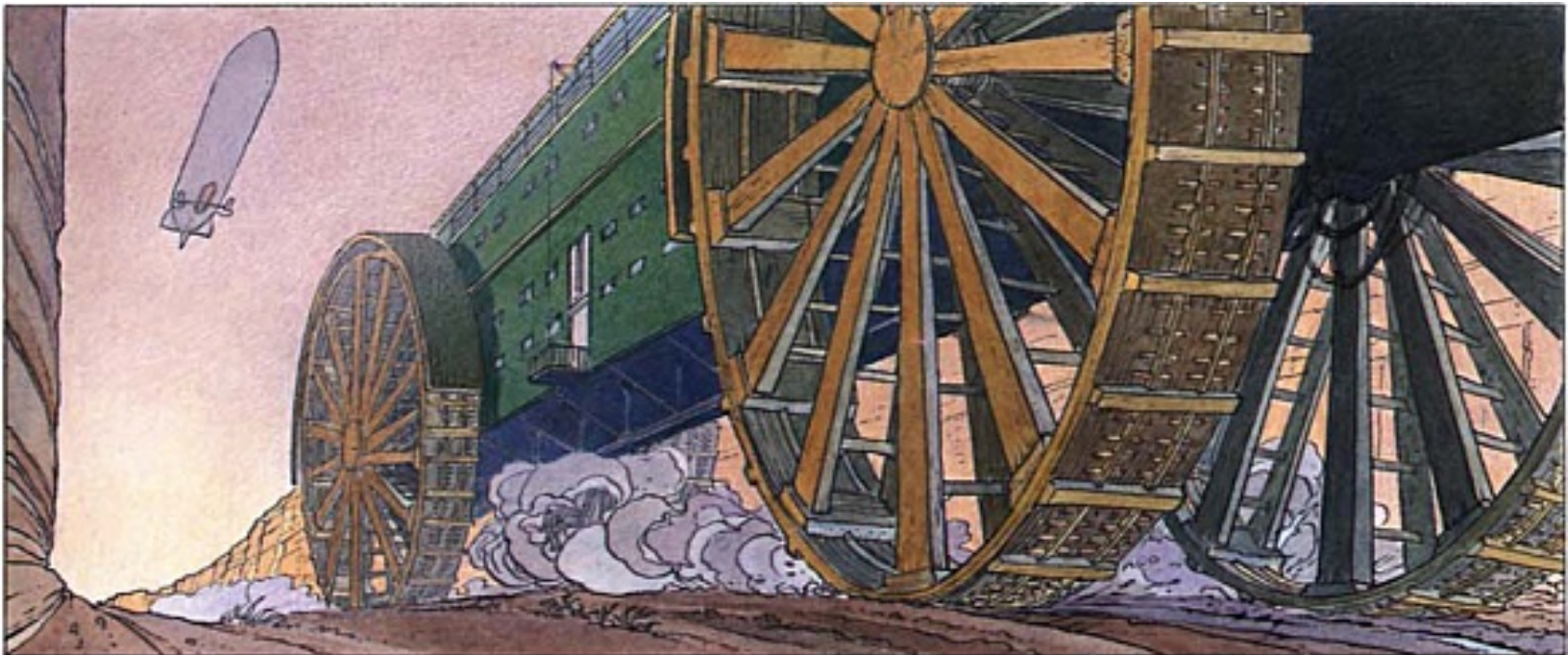
"NATURALLY, NATURALLY...NOTHING SERIOUS, MIND YOU! OUR PLOTTING INSTRUMENTS ARE SOMEWHAT OUT OF ORDER...THESE CANYONS NO DOUBT...AND WE ARE A BIT HESITANT OVER THE DIRECTION TO TAKE."

"IN SHORT, YOU'RE LOST," INTERJECTED HELLA WITH A BIG SMILE.

"LOST, THE WORD IS EXCESSIVE...LET'S SAY THAT WE ARE NOT ALTOGETHER AWARE OF WHERE WE ARE."

"THE ZEPPELIN WILL SHOW YOU THE WAY. WE WILL ADVANCE SLOWLY TO THE MOUTH OF THE CANYONS. FOLLOW US AND ALL WILL BE WELL."

"YOUNG PEOPLE," CONCLUDED THE PREFECT, "THROUGH US, ALL OF ALAXIS THANKS YOU!"



AS SOON AS THE DOOR WAS CLOSED BEHIND US, WE NO LONGER ATTEMPTED TO HOLD OURSELVES BACK AND LEFT LAUGHING WILDLY. THIS HILARITY HAD NOT STOPPED ONCE WE REJOINED THE ZEPPELIN. OUR ACCOUNTS AMUSED EVERYONE, INCLUDING BILIBINE.

AFTER AN HOUR, WE HAD CLEARED THE CANYONS AND COULD TAKE ON SPEED ANEW, LEAVING THE DESERT VESSEL TO CONTINUE ITS LONELY PATH TOWARDS THE OCEAN.



SATURDAY, MAY 27TH,
HALF PAST 7 IN THE MORNING

I SLEPT BADLY TONIGHT. HORRIBLE NIGHTMARES WOKE ME ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS AND EACH TIME THE DOUBT WAS MAKING ITSELF MORE CLEAR...WHAT IF I LET MYSELF BE TRICKED LIKE A CHILD? WHAT IF HELLA WAS CONCEALING THE SOUL OF A SPY BEHIND HER SWEET FACE? WHAT IF SHE HAD BEEN HIRED TO STEAL THE FORMULA FROM ME? SO MANY PEOPLE WOULD HAVE AN INTEREST IN ARMILIA'S NEVER GETTING UP AND RUNNING AGAIN...

HOWEVER, NO, I CAN'T BELIEVE IT: I RAISE MY EYES AND LOOK AT HER, SMILING PEACEFULLY IN HER SLEEP, THE VERY IMAGE OF INNOCENCE. BUT THE GREATEST TRAITORS, AREN'T THEY THOSE WHOM NO ONE WOULD DREAM OF SUSPECTING?

IN ANY CASE, THANK HEAVENS: YESTERDAY, DURING OUR LONG CONVERSATIONS, I WAS PRUDENT ENOUGH TO NOT LET SLIP A SINGLE WORD ABOUT MY MISSION.

ONE THING SEEMS CLEAR TO ME: THE ENVELOPE IS NO LONGER IN A SAFE PLACE IN THIS CABIN. I MUST SHELTER IT IN A HIDING PLACE THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO FIND.

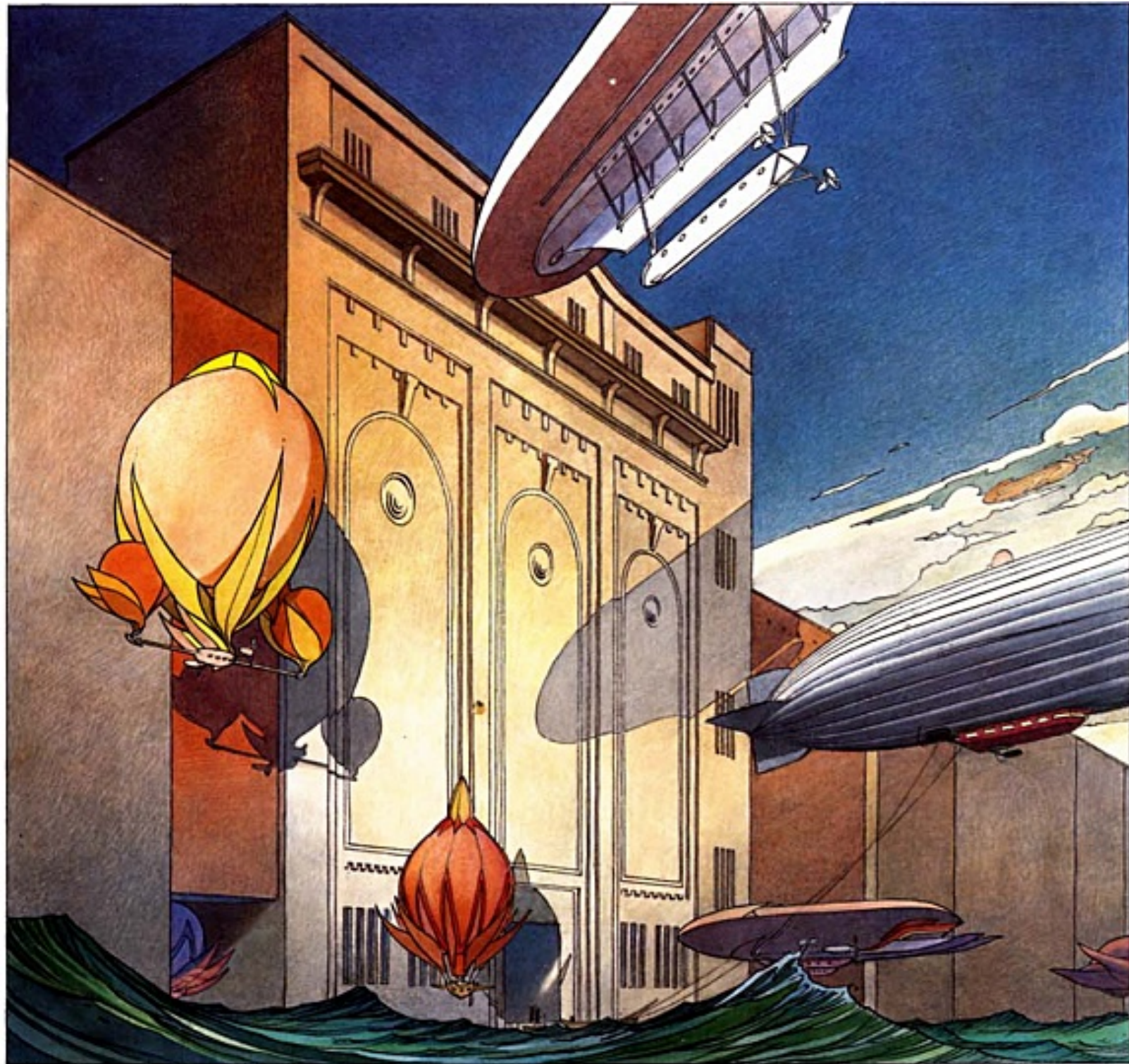
WELL, BETTER TO GET GOING RIGHT AWAY!



SATURDAY, MAY 27TH,
11 IN THE MORNING.

SCARCELY HAD I HIDDEN THE LETTER WHEN THE ZEPPELIN BEGAN A MOVEMENT OF DESCENT. I RETURNED QUICKLY TO THE CABIN.

"AH, THERE YOU ARE, FERDINAND!" SAID COMMANDANT MOLTCHANOV TO ME. "WE ARE APPROACHING MUHKA WHERE WE ARE GOING TO STOP OVER FOR TWO HOURS. A SIMPLE MATTER OF TAKING ON PROVISIONS...BUT IF EVER OUR YOUNG FRIEND DID NOT DESIRE TO CONTINUE ON WITH US TO THE END OF OUR LONG AND PERHAPS DANGEROUS VOYAGE, THIS WOULD BE THE IDEAL MOMENT TO LEAVE US. MUHKA IS A GREAT CENTER OF EXCHANGE, CONNECTED WITH ALL THE CITIES OF THE CONTINENT. YOU WOULD HAVE NO DIFFICULTY FINDING A MEANS OF TRANSPORT FOR THE CITY OF YOUR CHOICE.



DISCONCERTED, HELLA QUESTIONED ME WITH A LOOK, THEN SHE ANSWERED IN A CLEAR VOICE.

"IF IT DOESN'T BOTHER YOU, AND IF FERDINAND AGREES, I WOULD PREFER TO CONTINUE ON BOARD THIS ZEPPELIN. YOU SEE, NO ONE IS EXPECTING ME, NEITHER IN MUHKA NOR ANYWHERE ELSE. AS TO THE RISKS, WHY SHOULD THEY SCARE ME MORE THAN ANY OF THE OTHER PASSENGERS?"

"AS YOU WISH, YOUNG LADY, AS YOU WISH!" ANSWERED THE COMMANDANT.
AND HE TURNED TO LEAVE.





SATURDAY, MAY 27TH,
4 IN THE AFTERNOON.

FOR MORE THAN AN HOUR WE HAVE BEEN FLYING OVER BRÛSEL. NEVER WOULD I HAVE BELIEVED THAT SUCH A CITY COULD EXIST. BUILDINGS THRUSTING THEMSELVES TOWARDS THE SKY LIKE GREAT POPLARS, A MASS OF PEOPLE CROWDING ABOUT, HIGHWAYS, BRIDGES, STATIONS, AND EVERYWHERE BALLOONS AND DIRIGIBLES ALMOST LIKE OUR OWN!

HELLA NEVER TIRES OF THIS SPECTACLE: HER EYES GLUED TO THE PORTHOLE, SHE DOESN'T WANT TO MISS THE SLIGHTEST BIT...THE MORE THE HOURS PASS, THE MORE I AM TEMPTED TO BELIEVE WHAT SHE TOLD ME. I'M ALMOST ASHAMED TO HAVE SUSPECTED HER. PRUDENCE HOWEVER! DO WE EVER KNOW WHAT OUR ENEMIES ARE CAPABLE OF? WHO KNOWS IF, EVEN UNBEKNOWNST TO HER, THEY MIGHT HAVE MADE USE OF HER?



SATURDAY, MAY 27TH,
5 IN THE AFTERNOON.

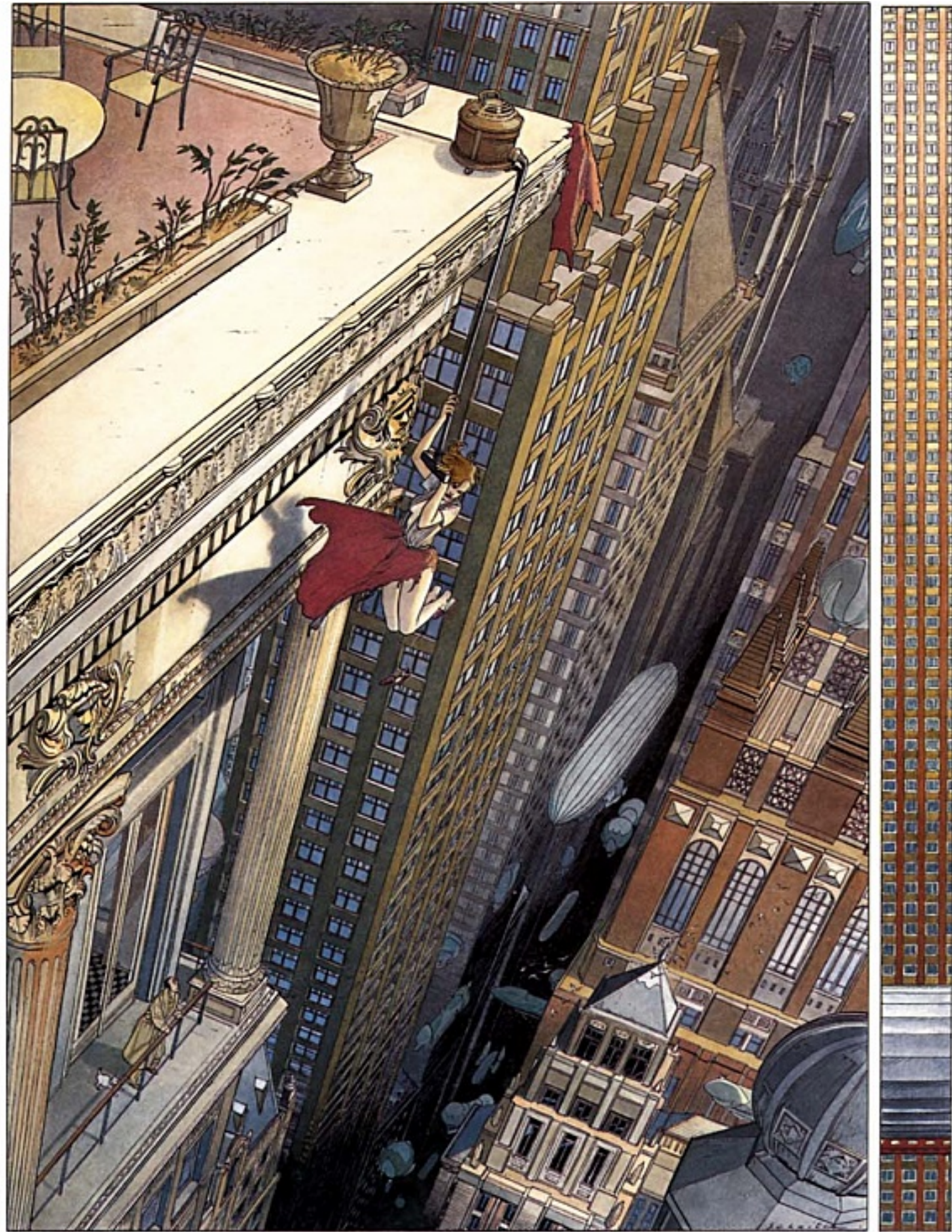
WE JUST WITNESSED A FRIGHTENING SPECTACLE. WE SAW AN UNFORTUNATE WOMAN HANGING IN THE VOID, HER LIFE HELD UP BY NO MORE THAN A WIRE. RIGHT AWAY WE WENT TO FIND THE COMMANDANT BEGGING HIM TO INTERVENE. SCARCELY HAD HE GLANCED TOWARDS THE WOMAN THAT HIS VOICE BECAME REASSURING.

"OH, IT'S ONLY THAT...DON'T WORRY ABOUT HER! IT MUST BE A MATTER OF SOME PUBLICITY STUNT FOR A NEW APPLIANCE, A VACUUM CLEANER, A FLOOR-POLISHER, SOMETHING ALONG THAT ORDER..."

"A STUNT...?"

"YES, THE INHABITANTS OF BRÛSEL ARE FOND OF THESE KINDS OF SPECTACLES. EVERYTHING IS ALWAYS IMPRESSIVE HERE!"

HIS RESPONSE CALMED US AT FIRST. REFLECTING UPON IT HOWEVER, I'M NO LONGER SO SURE IN BELIEVING IT. A PUBLICITY STUNT? BUT THEN, WHY WAS THERE ONLY THIS MAN AND HIS DOG TO OBSERVE IT? AND THEN, THIS WOMAN SEEMED REALLY TERRIFIED. WOULD AN ACTRESS HAVE PLAYED HER ROLE SO CONVINCINGLY?





SATURDAY MAY 27TH,
HALF PAST 6 IN THE EVENING.

EVENTS FOLLOW ONE AFTER THE OTHER IN
BRÛSEL AT AN ALMOST FRIGHTENING SPEED. LESS
THAN A QUARTER HOUR AFTER HAVING LOST SIGHT OF
THE WOMAN HANGING IN THE AIR, A VIOLENT,
EXPLOSIVE NOISE MADE US JUMP. RIGHT OVER US,
THE WINDOWS OF A BUILDING HAD JUST GIVEN WAY,
GIVING FREE COURSE TO AN INCREDIBLE MASS OF
BRANCHES AND LEAVES. ALL THE MEN ON BOARD
HURRIED TO THE PORTHOLES.





SEVERAL MOMENTS LATER, ANOTHER BUILDING WAS THE VICTIM OF THE SAME FATE.

I ASKED BRYAN TO LEND ME HIS BINOCULARS.

THE BUILDING HELD A STORE FOR FABRICS. IT WAS FROM THE CENTER OF THE GROUND FLOOR, AROUND A CURIOUS LAMP POST THAT THE VINES HAD BEGUN TO PUSH OUT. AFTER SEVERAL MINUTES THEY HAD ALREADY PIERCED THE GLASS. VERY DIGNIFIED, THE EMPLOYEES TOOK DOWN THE DRAPES TO SAVE THEM FROM THE DISASTER, WHILE A SEEMINGLY DESPAIRING MAN UNROLLED LARGE SHEETS OF PAPER AND VIOLENTLY STRUCK HIS FOREHEAD...

ALREADY, THERE WERE OTHER EXPLOSIONS OCCURRING IN EVERY CORNER OF THE CITY, AT AN EVER MORE RAPID RHYTHM. EVERYWHERE, NATURE WAS BEGINNING TO BURST OUT, MAKING WINDOWS AND ROOFS CRACK. ENTIRE TREES SHOT UP ABRUPTLY, GROWING AT A SPEED IMPOSSIBLE TO DESCRIBE.

THINGS WERE HAPPENING SO RAPIDLY THAT THE PLANTS EVEN LATCHED ON TO THE ZEPPELIN, DANGEROUSLY UNBALANCING IT.

"EVERYONE TO HIS POST!" CRIED THE COMMANDANT. "LARSSON, TAKE ON AS MUCH ALTITUDE AS POSSIBLE!"

CERTAIN VINES HAD ALREADY ATTACHED THEMSELVES SO FIRMLY TO THE VESSEL THAT WE WERE QUITE SHAKEN ABOUT AND THE CANVAS OF THE AIRSHIP WAS RIPPED IN SEVERAL PLACES. NOTHING SERIOUS IT SEEMS. NONETHELESS WE HAD A NARROW ESCAPE AND OUR FAREWELLS TO BRÛSEL WERE, TO SAY THE LEAST, PRECIPITOUS.





SATURDAY, MAY 27TH,
8 IN THE EVENING.

TO EACH CITY ITS OWN.

JUST NOW FLYING OVER A SMALL TOWN NAMED
BAYREUTH, WE WERE AT FIRST SURPRISED BY ITS
SEEMING DESERTEDNESS: NOT A WINDOW LIT, NOT A
SHADOW IN THE STREETS, NOTHING.

THE EXPLANATION WAS NOT LONG COMING. A
LITTLE FARTHER, WE SAW A COLOSSAL BUILDING
WHERE THE ENTIRE POPULATION WAS GATHERED. ALL
OF THESE PEOPLE HAD A GRAVE AND CONTEMPLATIVE
LOOK, AS THOUGH THE CEREMONY WERE OF THE
UTMOST IMPORTANCE. NONETHELESS, THAT WHICH OUR
BINOCULARS PERMITTED US TO SEE DID NOT SEEM
VERY SERIOUS: CHARACTERS IN BIZARRE COSTUMES,
RESEMBLING INDIANS A BIT, WERE WAILING AND
MAKING GREAT GESTURES.

ONLY THE COMMANDANT SEEMED TO HAVE FOUND
THIS MUSIC TO HIS TASTE. AND SOON, TO OUR
STUPEFACTION, HE BEGAN TO SING AND MARCH IN
CADENCE:

BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM-BAM
BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM-BAM
RA TA TA BOOM BOOM-BOOM
BOOM BAM RA TA- BOO OOM.



SUNDAY, MAY 28TH,
2 IN THE AFTERNOON

YESTERDAY EVENING DURING DINNER, I FELT THAT SOMETHING WASN'T QUITE RIGHT. HELLA WAS BEING QUIET. SHE WASN'T ANSWERING MY QUESTIONS AND WAS HARDLY TOUCHING HER PLATE'S CONTENTS THOUGH IT WAS AS DELICIOUS AS USUAL.

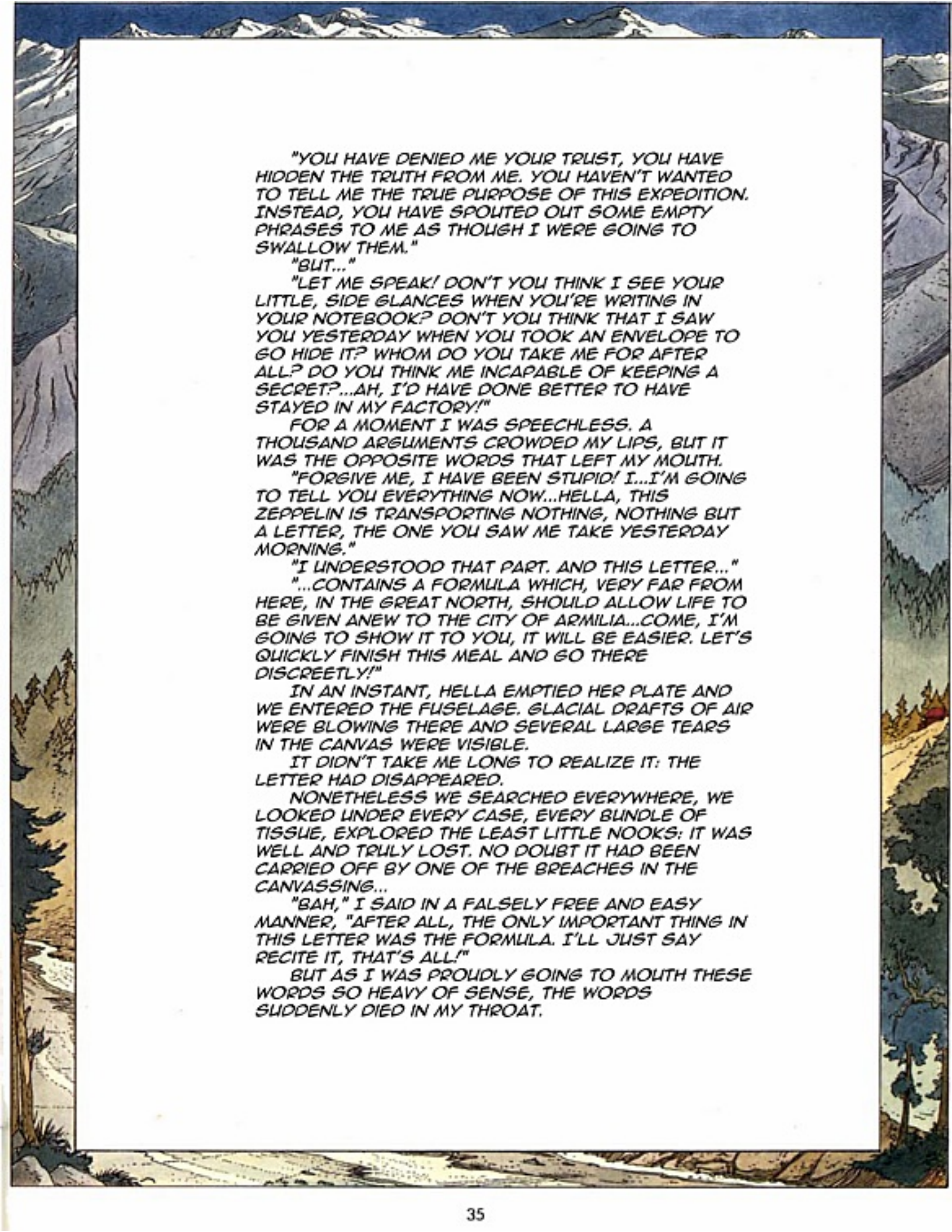
"WHAT IS IT, HELLA, WHAT'S GOING ON? ARE YOU DISAPPOINTED IN THIS VOYAGE?"

"NO, FERDINAND, IT'S NOT THAT. IT'S YOU WHO DISAPPOINT ME."

"ME, BUT..."

"YES, I KNOW, YOU WELCOMED ME ON BOARD THIS AIRSHIP, YOU CONVINCED THE COMMANDANT TO ACCEPT MY PRESENCE, YOU HAVE LET ME SHARE YOUR TABLE AND YOUR CABIN...AND YET, YOU HAVE DENIED ME THE MOST IMPORTANT THING."

"THE IMPORTANT PART? NOW, BE CLEARER, WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY?"



"YOU HAVE DENIED ME YOUR TRUST, YOU HAVE HIDDEN THE TRUTH FROM ME. YOU HAVEN'T WANTED TO TELL ME THE TRUE PURPOSE OF THIS EXPEDITION. INSTEAD, YOU HAVE SPOUTED OUT SOME EMPTY PHRASES TO ME AS THOUGH I WERE GOING TO SWALLOW THEM."

"BUT..."

"LET ME SPEAK! DON'T YOU THINK I SEE YOUR LITTLE, SIDE GLANCES WHEN YOU'RE WRITING IN YOUR NOTEBOOK? DON'T YOU THINK THAT I SAW YOU YESTERDAY WHEN YOU TOOK AN ENVELOPE TO GO HIDE IT? WHOM DO YOU TAKE ME FOR AFTER ALL? DO YOU THINK ME INCAPABLE OF KEEPING A SECRET?...AH, I'D HAVE DONE BETTER TO HAVE STAYED IN MY FACTORY!"

FOR A MOMENT I WAS SPEECHLESS. A THOUSAND ARGUMENTS CROWDED MY LIPS, BUT IT WAS THE OPPOSITE WORDS THAT LEFT MY MOUTH.

"FORGIVE ME, I HAVE BEEN STUPID! I...I'M GOING TO TELL YOU EVERYTHING NOW...HELLA, THIS ZEPPELIN IS TRANSPORTING NOTHING, NOTHING BUT A LETTER, THE ONE YOU SAW ME TAKE YESTERDAY MORNING."

"I UNDERSTOOD THAT PART. AND THIS LETTER..."

"...CONTAINS A FORMULA WHICH, VERY FAR FROM HERE, IN THE GREAT NORTH, SHOULD ALLOW LIFE TO BE GIVEN ANEW TO THE CITY OF ARMILIA...COME, I'M GOING TO SHOW IT TO YOU, IT WILL BE EASIER. LET'S QUICKLY FINISH THIS MEAL AND GO THERE DISCREETLY!"

IN AN INSTANT, HELLA EMPTIED HER PLATE AND WE ENTERED THE FUSELAGE. GLACIAL DRAFTS OF AIR WERE BLOWING THERE AND SEVERAL LARGE TEARS IN THE CANVAS WERE VISIBLE.

IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE IT: THE LETTER HAD DISAPPEARED.

NONETHELESS WE SEARCHED EVERYWHERE, WE LOOKED UNDER EVERY CASE, EVERY BUNDLE OF TISSUE, EXPLORED THE LEAST LITTLE NOOKS: IT WAS WELL AND TRULY LOST. NO DOUBT IT HAD BEEN CARRIED OFF BY ONE OF THE BREACHES IN THE CANVASSING...

"BAH," I SAID IN A FALSELY FREE AND EASY MANNER, "AFTER ALL, THE ONLY IMPORTANT THING IN THIS LETTER WAS THE FORMULA. I'LL JUST SAY RECITE IT, THAT'S ALL!"

BUT AS I WAS PROUDLY GOING TO MOUTH THESE WORDS SO HEAVY OF SENSE, THE WORDS SUDDENLY DIED IN MY THROAT.



IMPOSSIBLE TO REMEMBER THE LEAST MORSEL OF UNCLE ZACHARIUS'S FORMULA! THE MORE I SEARCHED FOR IT, THE MORE IT SEEMED TO GET FARTHER FROM MY MIND. I STAMPED MY FEET, I BIT MY FINGERS; IF HELLA HADN'T BEEN THERE, I THINK I'D HAVE STARTED CRYING.

"DON'T BE UPSET," SHE WAS TELLING ME, "IT'S YOUR EMOTION, YOUR ANXIETY...YOU'LL SEE, IN AN HOUR IT'LL COME BACK TO YOU."

BUT TWO HOURS LATER, NOTHING HAD COME BACK TO ME.

AT NIGHT, THE WORDS STARTED DANCING IN MY HEAD LIKE EVIL WILL-O'-THE-WISPS. THEY WERE SCAMPERING IN EVERY DIRECTION, JUMPING, GRIMACING, SNIGGERING; THEY GLIDED ABOUT LIKE SHADOWS, CHANGING THEIR COSTUMES, HIDING THEMSELVES UNDER MASKS. ONE INSTANT MORE AND I WOULD RECOGNIZE THEM BUT THEY HAD ALREADY DISAPPEARED IN THE FIRST GLEAMS OF THE DAWN.

AH, IF I HAD ONLY NOTED THE FORMULA IN MY NOTEBOOK! BUT NO, MY STUPIDITY, MY DISTRUST HAVE SUCCEEDED IN MAKING ME SPOIL EVERYTHING. POOR FERDINAND, HOW UNWORTHY YOU ARE OF YOUR MISSION!



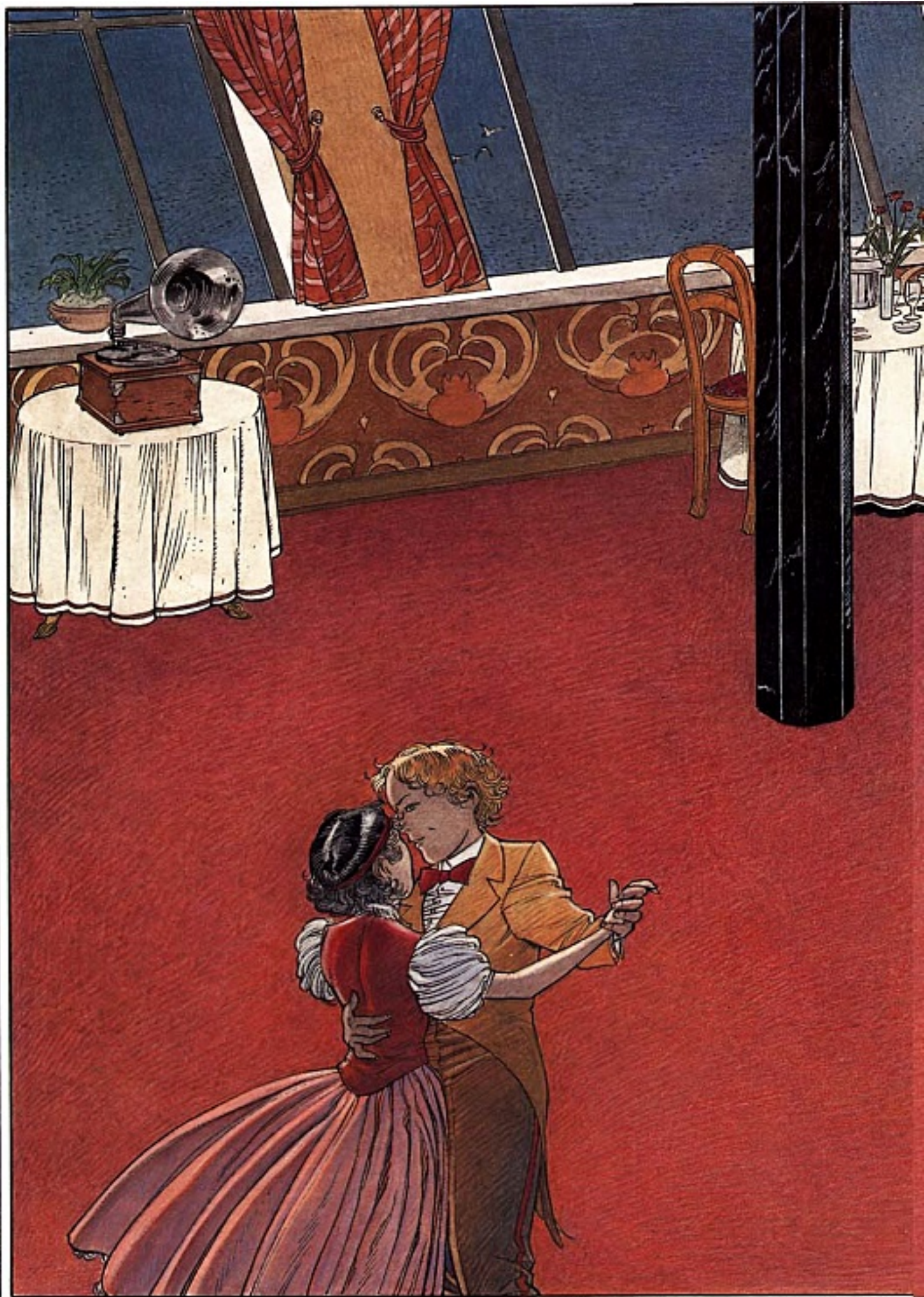
SUNDAY, MAY 28TH,
6 IN THE AFTERNOON.

HELLA IS TRULY ADORABLE. HOW COULD I HAVE DOUBTED HER RECTITUDE? JUST NOW, WHILE I WAS SO DESPAIRING, SHE SUCCEEDED IN MAKING ME REGAIN MY CONFIDENCE.

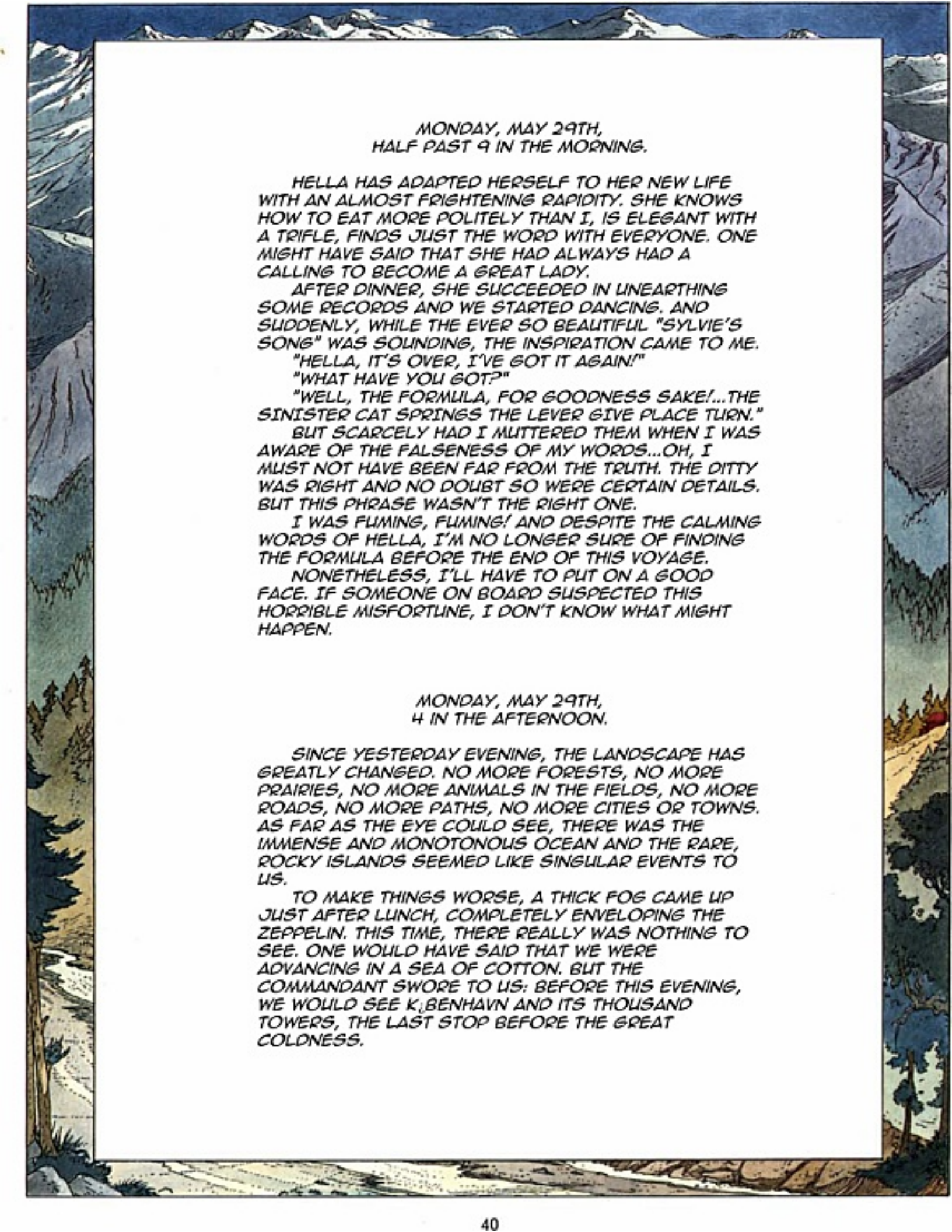
"DON'T BE UPSET ABOUT THE FORMULA!" YOU'LL FIND IT AGAIN JUST LIKE THAT, IN AN INSTANT, RIGHT WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT IT...COME ON, FERDINAND, STOP WORRYING YOURSELF. YOU ARE ALWAYS SO SERIOUS..."

WE LAUGHED AND CHATTED ALL AFTERNOON LONG. BUT THE FORMULA DIDN'T COME BACK TO ME.

THIS TIME IN ANY CASE, WE WERE REALLY ENTERING THE NORTH. SHORTLY AFTER HAVING PASSED THE SEVERE CITY OF GENOVA, THE MAGNIFICENT SUNLIGHT WHICH HAD ACCOMPANIED US FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE VOYAGE BEGAN TO BE VEILED. IT SEEMS THAT THE TEMPERATURE IS GLACIAL OUTSIDE. BUT INSIDE, IT'S STILL AS NICE AS EVER.







MONDAY, MAY 29TH,
HALF PAST 9 IN THE MORNING.

HELLA HAS ADAPTED HERSELF TO HER NEW LIFE WITH AN ALMOST FRIGHTENING RAPIDITY. SHE KNOWS HOW TO EAT MORE POLITELY THAN I, IS ELEGANT WITH A TRIFLE, FINDS JUST THE WORD WITH EVERYONE. ONE MIGHT HAVE SAID THAT SHE HAD ALWAYS HAD A CALLING TO BECOME A GREAT LADY.

AFTER DINNER, SHE SUCCEEDED IN UNEARTHING SOME RECORDS AND WE STARTED DANCING. AND SUDDENLY, WHILE THE EVER SO BEAUTIFUL "SYLVIE'S SONG" WAS SOUNDING, THE INSPIRATION CAME TO ME.

"HELLA, IT'S OVER, I'VE GOT IT AGAIN!"

"WHAT HAVE YOU GOT?"

"WELL, THE FORMULA, FOR GOODNESS SAKE!...THE SINISTER CAT SPRINGS THE LEVER GIVE PLACE TURN."

BUT SCARCELY HAD I MUTTERED THEM WHEN I WAS AWARE OF THE FALSENESS OF MY WORDS...OH, I MUST NOT HAVE BEEN FAR FROM THE TRUTH. THE DITTY WAS RIGHT AND NO DOUBT SO WERE CERTAIN DETAILS. BUT THIS PHRASE WASN'T THE RIGHT ONE.

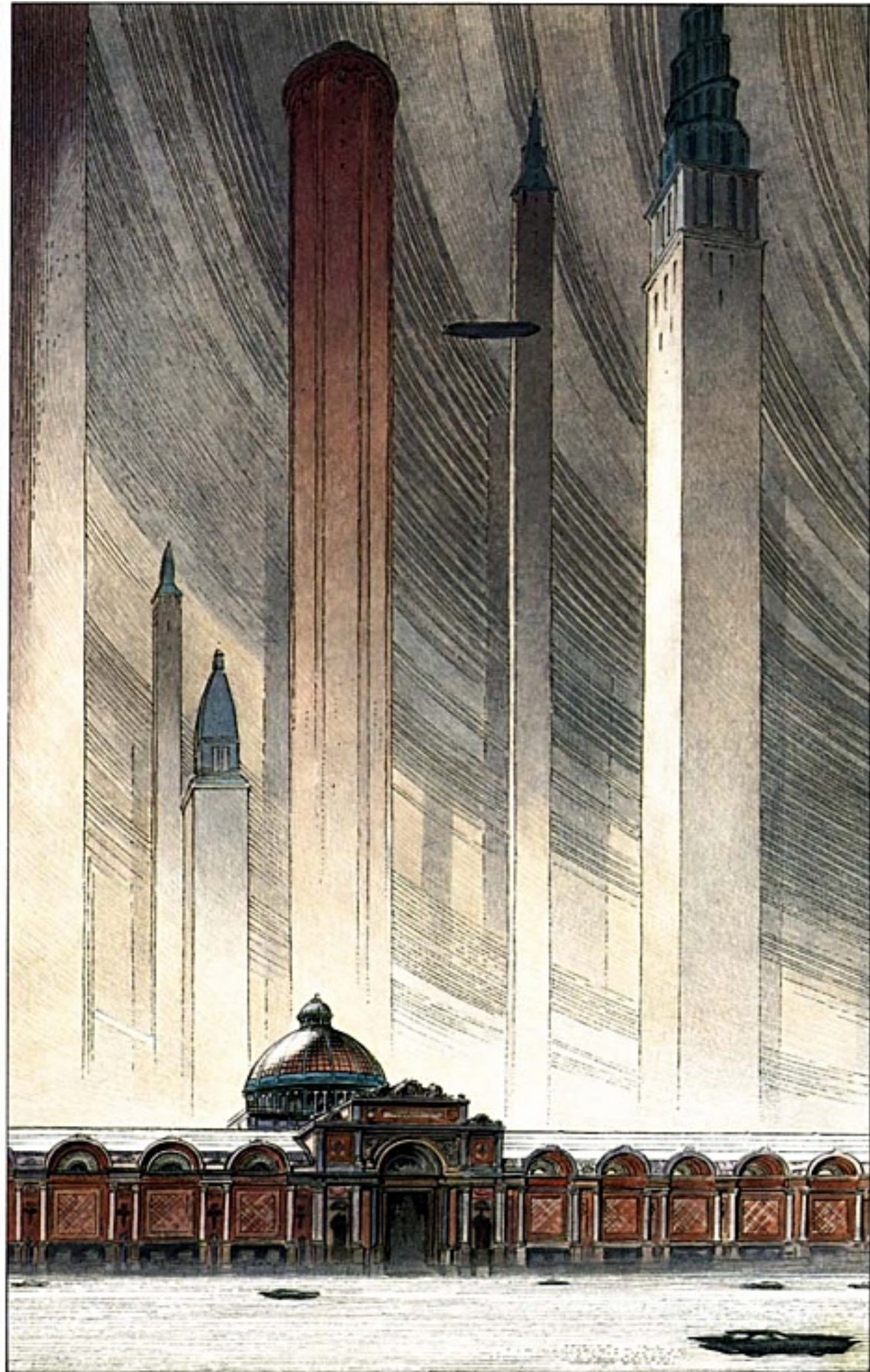
I WAS FUMING, FUMING! AND DESPITE THE CALMING WORDS OF HELLA, I'M NO LONGER SURE OF FINDING THE FORMULA BEFORE THE END OF THIS VOYAGE.

NONETHELESS, I'LL HAVE TO PUT ON A GOOD FACE. IF SOMEONE ON BOARD SUSPECTED THIS HORRIBLE MISFORTUNE, I DON'T KNOW WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN.

MONDAY, MAY 29TH,
4 IN THE AFTERNOON.

SINCE YESTERDAY EVENING, THE LANDSCAPE HAS GREATLY CHANGED. NO MORE FORESTS, NO MORE PRAIRIES, NO MORE ANIMALS IN THE FIELDS, NO MORE ROADS, NO MORE PATHS, NO MORE CITIES OR TOWNS. AS FAR AS THE EYE COULD SEE, THERE WAS THE IMMENSE AND MONOTONOUS OCEAN AND THE RARE, ROCKY ISLANDS SEEMED LIKE SINGULAR EVENTS TO US.

TO MAKE THINGS WORSE, A THICK FOG CAME UP JUST AFTER LUNCH, COMPLETELY ENVELOPING THE ZEPPELIN. THIS TIME, THERE REALLY WAS NOTHING TO SEE. ONE WOULD HAVE SAID THAT WE WERE ADVANCING IN A SEA OF COTTON. BUT THE COMMANDANT SWORE TO US: BEFORE THIS EVENING, WE WOULD SEE KJENHAVN AND ITS THOUSAND TOWERS, THE LAST STOP BEFORE THE GREAT COLDNESS.



MONDAY, MAY 29TH,
8 IN THE EVENING.

HE HADN'T LIED TO US: SHORTLY AFTER SEVEN O'CLOCK, WE SAW K₁BENHAVN. THE K₁BENHAVN OF WHICH I HAD OFTEN DREAMED, THE K₁BENHAVN THAT MY UNCLE ZAHARIUS CHERISHED SO MUCH THAT, EVEN THOUGH HE KNOWS THE CITY ONLY THROUGH BOOKS, HE WISHED TO BAPTIZE THIS ZEPPELIN WITH ITS NAME, THIS MAGICAL AND PROMISING NAME, WITH THIS LARGE K LIKE THE ENTRANCE OF A GREAT PORT, THE O BARRED AS THOUGH IT WERE A BORDER TO CROSS, THEN THIS LONG TRAIN OF LETTERS THAT WERE SO DIFFICULT TO PRONOUNCE.

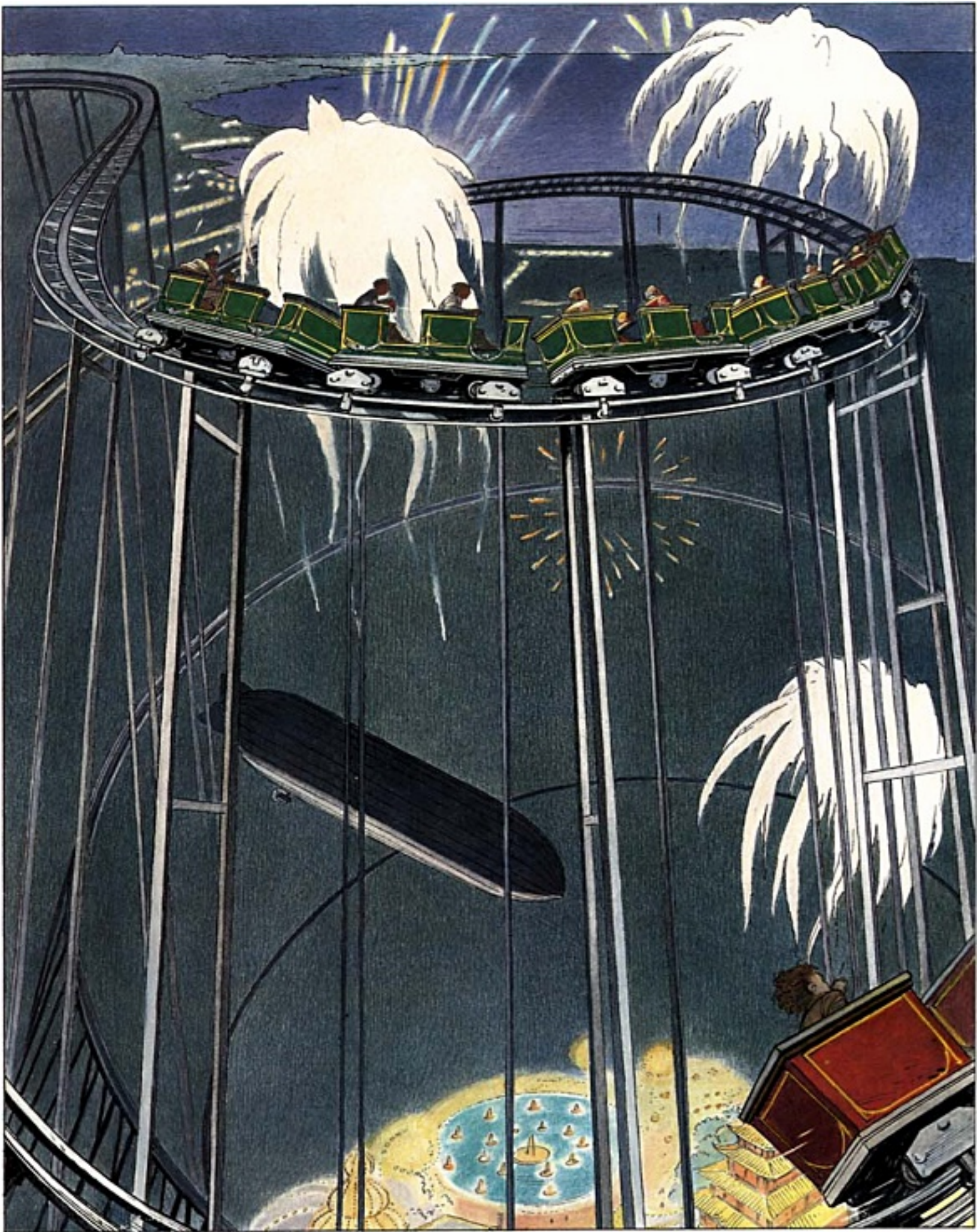
THE COMMANDANT APPROACHED US. HE TOO SEEMED HAPPY TO HAVE FINALLY ARRIVED HERE.

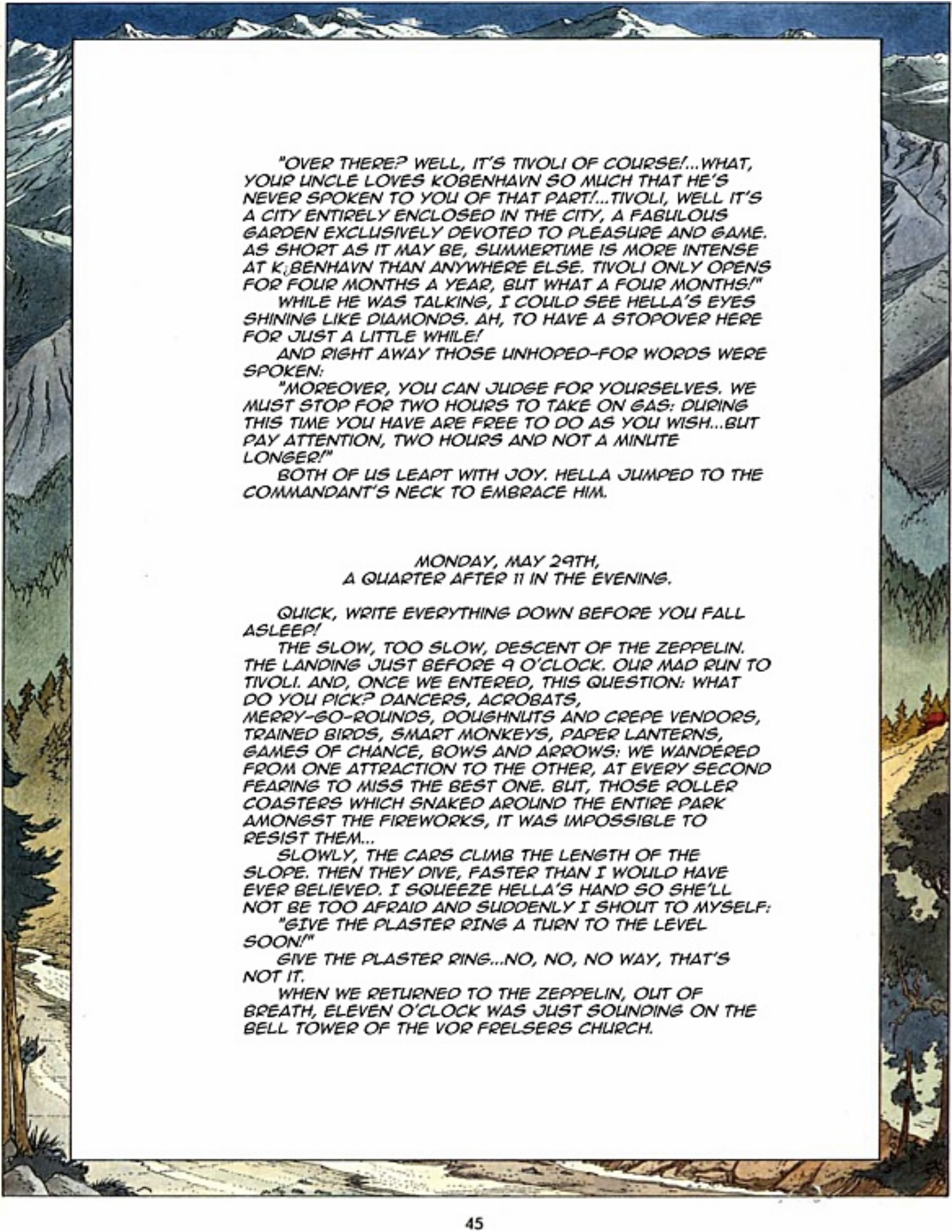


"DON'T BE DECEIVED," HE SAID SUDDENLY, DESPITE ITS PEACEFUL AND SERIOUS AIRS, K₁BENHAVN IS AN INFERNO. THE FABULOUS MICROCLIMATE WHICH ENSHROUDS IT HAS MADE IT THE ONLY GREAT CENTER OF THIS PART OF THE WORLD. UNDER THE MOST SAGE ROOFS, BEHIND THE STRICTEST FACADES, SOMETHING IS ALWAYS GOING ON...THERE, LOOK AT THAT BALLOON THAT HAS ONLY JUST NOW BERTHED. SEE THE PEOPLE POURING OUT AND BUSTLING ABOUT, THOSE DOORS OF WHICH ONE WOULD HAVE NEVER BEFORE GUESSED THE EXISTENCE!...IN TWO MINUTES, NOT THE LEAST TRACE WILL REMAIN OF IT ALL..."

"AND OVER THERE, WHAT KIND OF LIGHTS ARE THOSE?"







"OVER THERE? WELL, IT'S TIVOLI OF COURSE!...WHAT, YOUR UNCLE LOVES KOBENHAVN SO MUCH THAT HE'S NEVER SPOKEN TO YOU OF THAT PART?...TIVOLI, WELL IT'S A CITY ENTIRELY ENCLOSED IN THE CITY, A FABULOUS GARDEN EXCLUSIVELY DEVOTED TO PLEASURE AND GAME. AS SHORT AS IT MAY BE, SUMMERTIME IS MORE INTENSE AT KOBENHAVN THAN ANYWHERE ELSE. TIVOLI ONLY OPENS FOR FOUR MONTHS A YEAR, BUT WHAT A FOUR MONTHS!"

WHILE HE WAS TALKING, I COULD SEE HELLA'S EYES SHINING LIKE DIAMONDS. AH, TO HAVE A STOPOVER HERE FOR JUST A LITTLE WHILE!

AND RIGHT AWAY THOSE UNHOPED-FOR WORDS WERE SPOKEN:

"MOREOVER, YOU CAN JUDGE FOR YOURSELVES. WE MUST STOP FOR TWO HOURS TO TAKE ON GAS: DURING THIS TIME YOU HAVE ARE FREE TO DO AS YOU WISH...BUT PAY ATTENTION, TWO HOURS AND NOT A MINUTE LONGER!"

BOTH OF US LEAPT WITH JOY. HELLA JUMPED TO THE COMMANDANT'S NECK TO EMBRACE HIM.

MONDAY, MAY 29TH,
A QUARTER AFTER 11 IN THE EVENING.

QUICK, WRITE EVERYTHING DOWN BEFORE YOU FALL ASLEEP!

THE SLOW, TOO SLOW, DESCENT OF THE ZEPPELIN. THE LANDING JUST BEFORE 9 O'CLOCK. OUR MAD RUN TO TIVOLI. AND, ONCE WE ENTERED, THIS QUESTION: WHAT DO YOU PICK? DANCERS, ACROBATS, MERRY-GO-ROUNDS, DOUGHNUTS AND CREPE VENDORS, TRAINED BIRDS, SMART MONKEYS, PAPER LANTERNS, GAMES OF CHANCE, BOWS AND ARROWS: WE WANDERED FROM ONE ATTRACTION TO THE OTHER, AT EVERY SECOND FEARING TO MISS THE BEST ONE. BUT, THOSE ROLLER COASTERS WHICH SNAKED AROUND THE ENTIRE PARK AMONGST THE FIREWORKS, IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO RESIST THEM...

SLOWLY, THE CARS CLIMB THE LENGTH OF THE SLOPE. THEN THEY DIVE, FASTER THAN I WOULD HAVE EVER BELIEVED. I SQUEEZE HELLA'S HAND SO SHE'LL NOT BE TOO AFRAID AND SUDDENLY I SHOUT TO MYSELF:

"GIVE THE PLASTER RING A TURN TO THE LEVEL SOON!"

GIVE THE PLASTER RING...NO, NO, NO WAY, THAT'S NOT IT.

WHEN WE RETURNED TO THE ZEPPELIN, OUT OF BREATH, ELEVEN O'CLOCK WAS JUST SOUNDING ON THE BELL TOWER OF THE VOR FRELSERS CHURCH.



TUESDAY, MAY 30TH,
HALF PAST 10 IN THE MORNING.

LAST NIGHT OUR VOYAGE TOOK A DIFFERENT
TURN.

TOWARDS FOUR IN THE MORNING, WE WERE
AWAKENED BY A VIOLENT JOLT. OUTSIDE, A STORM
HAD JUST BROKEN OUT. THE SHAKING WAS SO
ABRUPT THAT SOON THE DISHES AND FURNITURE
STARTED FALLING OVER.

SUDDENLY, THE AIRSHIP STOOD ON ITS TAIL AS
THOUGH IT WERE HEADING TOWARDS THE MOON.
THEN, ALMOST AS SUDDENLY, THE PROW BEGAN
POINTING TOWARDS THE GROUND AS THOUGH WE
WERE GOING TO CRASH.

WE GOT OUT AS BEST WE COULD, BARELY
AVOIDING BREAKING OUR NECKS AT EACH STEP. THE
CORRIDOR WAS GLACIAL; AS FOR THE DINING ROOM,
IT WAS A NOTHING LESS THAN RUINS, STREWN WITH
THE DEBRIS OF DISHES AND FOOD AND STINKING OF
WINE.

FINALLY, WE MADE IT TO THE PILOTING ROOM.
COMMANDANT MOLTCHANOV WAS SO AGITATED THAT
HE DIDN'T AT FIRST SEE US.

"AH, YOU'RE HERE!...FERDINAND, I'LL BE HONEST,
THE SITUATION IS GRAVE...A COLD FRONT OF A
VIOLENCE UNHEARD OF FOR THE SEASON HAS
CAUSED SERIOUS DEPOSITS OF ICE ON THE UPPER
PART OF THE DIRIGIBLE..."

"WHENCE THE TEMPERATURE...," I BEGAN.

"WHENCE, MOST OF ALL, A DANGEROUS EXCESS
OF WEIGHT WHICH IS MAKING US DESCEND LITTLE BY
LITTLE AND IS UNBALANCING US. THERE IS BUT ONE
THING TO DO..."

"DUMP BALLAST..."

"EXACTLY! A LOT OF BALLAST...WE'LL HAVE TO BE MERCILESS..."

AND RIGHT AWAY HE GIVES THE ORDER TO THROW OVERBOARD EVERYTHING THAT ISN'T ABSOLUTELY VITAL.

A GOOD PART OF THE PROVISIONS, MOST OF THE WATER AND GAS AND EVEN A GREAT QUANTITY OF THE FUEL THUS FOUND THEMSELVES FLUNG INTO THE VOID.

WE DID NOT LONG AWAIT THE RESULT. IN A FEW MINUTES, WE CLIMB SEVERAL HUNDRED YARDS HIGHER. FOR A MOMENT, WE MIGHT THINK WE'RE SAVED.



ALAS, THIS IMPROVEMENT IS ONLY OF SHORT DURATION. AFTER LESS THAN AN HOUR, AN ICY SNOW BECOMES A BLIZZARD, INCREASING THE LAYER OF ICE TO FRIGHTENING PROPORTIONS.

INEXORABLY, THE ZEPPELIN BEGINS TO DESCEND AGAIN AT THE SAME TIME AS OUR MEASURING INSTRUMENTS FAIL US ONE AFTER THE OTHER. NO MORE COMPASS, NO MORE ALTIMETER, NO MORE RADIO-TELEGRAPH: WE'RE CUT OFF FROM THE WORLD.



TUESDAY, MAY 30TH,
3 IN THE AFTERNOON.

HOW MUCH LONGER WILL I BE ABLE TO KEEP
THIS JOURNAL?

THE SITUATION IS GETTING WORSE BY THE
HOUR. SNOW, HAIL, SUDDEN GUSTS OF WIND
COMING FROM ALL DIRECTIONS, NO HARSH BLOW
HAS BEEN SPARED US.

"IN TWENTY YEARS OF NAVIGATION, I HAVE
NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT," DECLARES THE
COMMANDANT TO US. "BY ALL INDICATIONS, IT'S
THE DISTURBANCE IN ARMILIA WHICH IS BEGINNING
TO MAKE ITSELF FELT. DOUBTLESS IT WAS THAT
ALREADY WHICH WAS AFFECTING THE
INSTRUMENTS OF THE DESERT VESSEL...IF WE
ARE NOT ABLE TO INTERVENE IN TIME, THE WHOLE
CONTINENT WILL SOON BE PLUNGED INTO
TURMOIL."

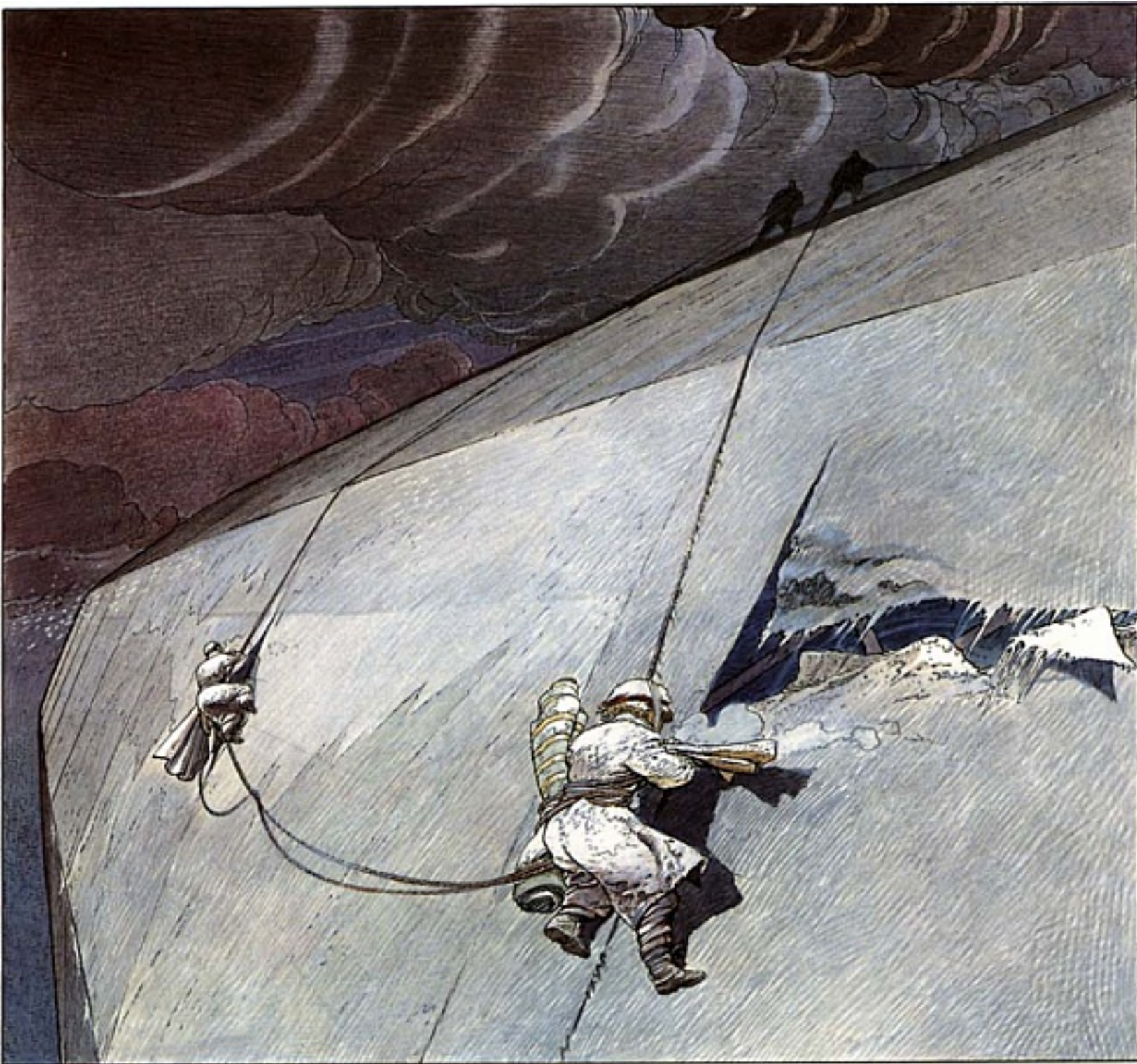
A HORRID NOISE SUDDENLY DROWNS OUT HIS
VOICE. HAS THE END ALREADY COME? HAS THE
DIRIGIBLE BROKEN INTO TWO? NO, IT'S ONLY AN
ENORMOUS BLOCK OF ICE WHICH JUST BROKE
OFF ONLY TO FALL ONTO A PROPELLER AND
BREAK INTO A MINUSCULE FRAGMENTS. SHOOTING
OFF LIKE BULLETS, THE FRAGMENTS ARE STRIKING
THE CANVASSING WITH AN INCREDIBLE VIOLENCE.

"REDUCE SPEED!" SHOUTS THE COMMANDANT.
"REDUCE, OTHERWISE, WE'RE LOST!"

THE PROJECTIVE FORCE OF THE ICE SHARDS
LESSENS IMMEDIATELY. AFTER A RAPID
INSPECTION OF THE FUSELAGE, THE
COMMANDANT HAS US GATHER AROUND HIM.

"THANK HEAVENS," HE EXPLAINS TO US
GRAVELY, "NO PIECES OF ICE STRUCK THE GAS
COMPARTMENTS. BUT THIS LUCK WILL NOT LAST
FOREVER. IF ONE OF THEM WERE TO EXPLODE, IT
WOULD BE AN INEVITABLE
CATASTROPHE...LIKewise, SEE HOW OUR
EQUILIBRIUM HAS ALREADY BECOME PRECARIOUS.
WE SHOULD REPAIR THE TEARS BEFORE THEY GET
ANY LARGER. FROM NOW ON, EVERYONE'S HELP
IS REQUIRED."

MECHANIC, NAVIGATOR, COOK AND STEWARD,
ALL OF US CLIMB TO THE SUMMIT OF THE
DIRIGIBLE WITH ROLLS OF CANVAS UNDER OUR
ARMS. WHEN WE GO OUT INTO THE OPEN AIR, A
GLACIAL WIND WHIPS AT OUR FACES.



SOLIDLY SUPPORTED, WE DESCEND TOWARDS THE BREACHES AND BEGIN TO PIECE THEM TOGETHER. THE COLD IS SO HARSH THAT WE REGULARLY HAVE TO GO INSIDE TO WARM OUR HANDS FOR FEAR THAT THEY MIGHT FREEZE.

THE RIPS ARE MORE NUMEROUS THAN WE HAD FIRST BELIEVED. OUR STOCK OF CANVAS IS SOON EXHAUSTED. WE SACRIFICE CURTAINS, BED COVERS AND RUGS AS WELL AS OUR HEAVIEST CLOTHING.

WHEN WE ARE FINALLY ABLE TO GO BACK IN, WE FIND COMMANDANT MOLTCHANOV PACING THE DECK, DESPERATELY LOOKING FOR AN ANSWER.

"MY FRIENDS," HE ANNOUNCES SUDDENLY, "WE MAY AS WELL GO FOR BROKE AND DESCEND MUCH LOWER..."

"LOWER?"

"YES, IT'S OUR ONLY HOPE FOR FINDING A BREAK IN THE CLOUDS AND MAYBE FOR DEFROSTING. THE RISK IS SERIOUS, I WON'T HIDE IT FROM YOU: IF IT IS AS COLD AS HERE, IT WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO CLIMB HIGHER AND WE WILL HAVE HASTENED OUR FALL."

WE HAVE TO TRY IN ALL EVENTS. WE ALL ENTHUSIASTICALLY ENDORSE HIS PROPOSAL.

THERE WE GO, WE'VE JUST BEGUN OUR DESCENT. OUR FATE WILL PLAY OUT IN THE NEXT FEW MINUTES...



TUESDAY, MAY 30TH,
A QUARTER TO 5.

HOORAY! IT WAS THE RIGHT DECISION! TWO HUNDRED YARDS LOWER, THE ATMOSPHERE WAS MUCH WARMER AND THE FIRST SIGNS OF DEFROSTING WEREN'T LONG BECOMING EVIDENT.

NATURALLY THE SITUATION IS NO LONGER AT ALL WHAT IT WAS AT THE BEGINNING OF OUR VOYAGE. THE ZEPPELIN HAS SUFFERED ENORMOUSLY AND A GOOD NUMBER OF THE DAMAGES ARE FOR THE MOMENT IRREPARABLE.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO GO BEYOND A TEMPERATURE OF 46°F IN THE NACELLE WITH THE LITTLE GAS REMAINING TO US. AS FOR FOOD, WE ARE GOING TO HAVE TO RATION OURSELVES MOST SERIOUSLY.

THE MOST GRAVE SITUATION, HOWEVER, IS NOT THE PRIVATIONS, IT'S THAT WE DON'T KNOW IN WHICH DIRECTION WE ARE GOING. LOST IN THE WHITE EXPANSE, OBLIGED TO TREK FORTH ALMOST BLINDLY, WE WATCH IN VAIN FOR ANY KIND OF REFERENCE POINT.

IN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS, THIS CALM CROSSING HAS BECOME A VOYAGE OF DESPERATION.



WEDNESDAY, MAY 31ST,
HALF PAST 8 IN THE MORNING.

LAST NIGHT, ONCE WE WERE FINALLY ABLE TO REST A BIT, PACKED AGAINST EACH OTHER IN THE DINING ROOM, I AWOKE WITH A START AND ANNOUNCED IN A STRONG VOICE:

"QUINN PLAYS LEVEL SISTER, THE CAT JUMPS IN THE SPRING AT NOON!"

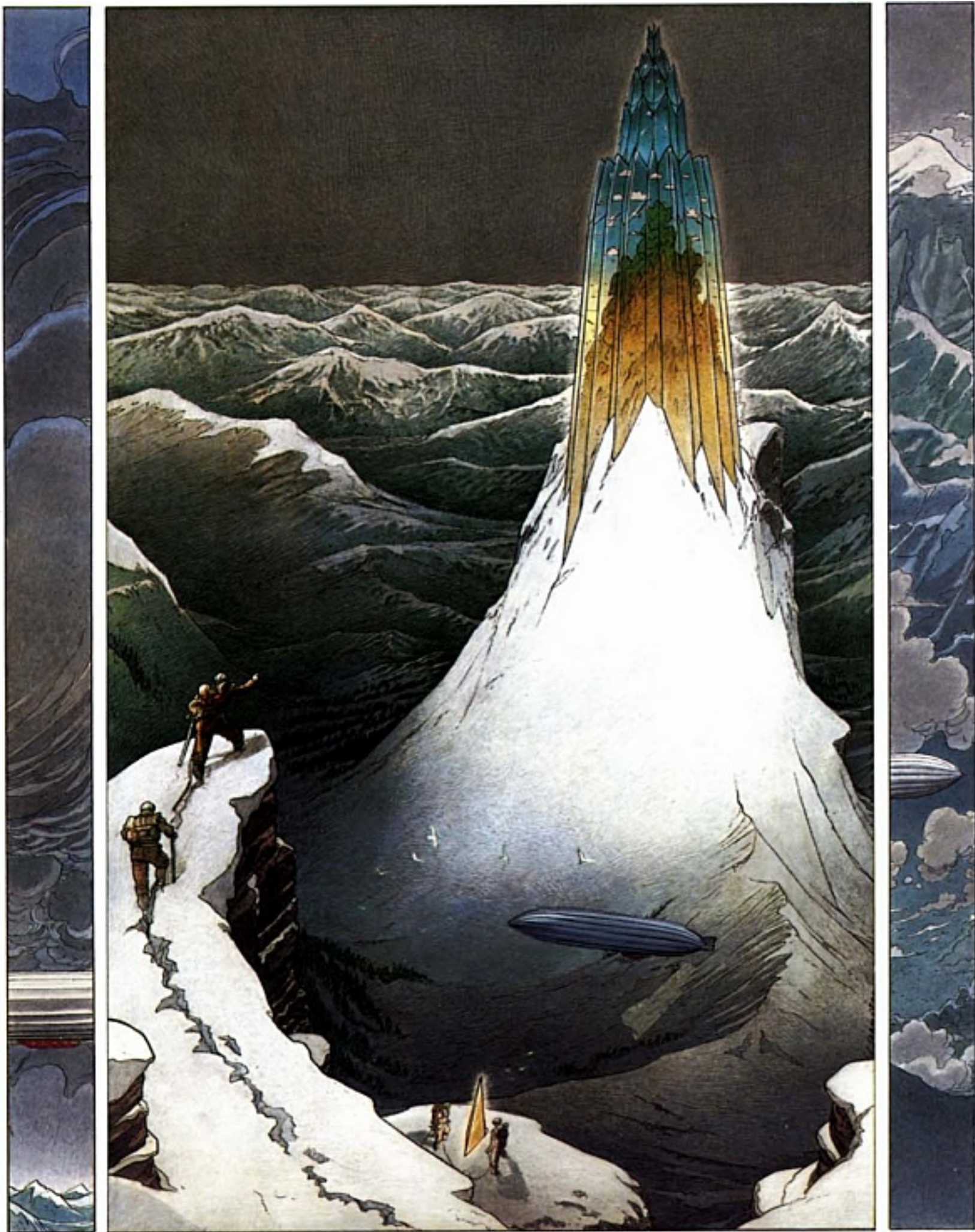
LUCKILY ONLY LARSSON AND BILIBINE STIRRED FROM THEIR SLEEP. THEY SAT UP AND LOOKED AT ME WITH STUPOR AS THOUGH I HAD LOST MY MIND. BUT ALREADY ALL ILLUSION HAD LEFT ME.

"IT'S NOTHING...EXCUSE ME...A NIGHTMARE, A SIMPLE NIGHTMARE..."

"QUINN PLAYS LEVEL SISTER," BILIBINE REPEATED PENSIVELY, "WHERE IN HECK DID THIS KID COME UP WITH THAT?"

THEN, HIS HEAD FELL HEAVILY BACK ON ITS PILLOW.

AS FOR ME, IN SPITE OF MY FATIGUE, I COULDN'T GO BACK TO SLEEP. THE URGENCIES OF THESE LAST HOURS HAD DISTRACTED ME FROM THIS WORRY, BUT HERE IT WAS BACK AGAIN, MORE CRUEL AND MORE HAUNTING THAN EVER. WOULD I PRESENT MYSELF EMPTY-HANDED TO OLD PYM? WOULD WE HAVE SUFFERED IN VAIN ALL THESE DAYS? I DON'T DARE IMAGINE WITHOUT TERROR THE MOMENT OF OUR ARRIVAL AT ARMILIA.



WEDNESDAY, MAY 31ST,
A QUARTER AFTER NOON.

IF WE HAVE NOT YET GOTTEN OURSELVES THROUGH THE TRIP, AT LEAST WE ARE AGAIN ON THE RIGHT PATH.

OUR EYES OPENED WIDE, HELLA AND I HAD FOR HOURS GLUED OURSELVES TO THE PORTHOLE, DESPERATELY SEARCHING THE LEAST LANDMARK. AND SUDDENLY, IN THE DISTANCE, A BRIGHT SHINING, LIKE THAT OF A GIGANTIC DIAMOND FLASHING WITH ALL ITS FIRES.

"LAND, LAND!" I COULD NOT PREVENT MYSELF FROM CRYING.

BUT WHILE THE OTHERS HURRIED TOWARDS US, A GRAY CLOUD HID IT FROM OUR EYES. LARSSON FLASHED ME A LOOK OF SADNESS, AS IF MY MADNESS WERE NO LONGER IN DOUBT.

SOON, FORTUNATELY, THE THING BEGAN TO GLIMMER AGAIN AND EVERYONE GAVE WAY TO THEIR SUPPOSITIONS. AFTER AN HOUR, WE COULD SPY AN IMMENSE TOWER OF LIGHT, A STRANGE LIGHTHOUSE LOST IN THE MIDDLE OF THE GLACIERS.

"MOUNT GLA'VER," SUDDENLY SHOUTS BILIBINE. "BUT OF COURSE, IT CAN ONLY BE GLA'VER AND IN THAT CASE..."

WITHOUT EVEN FINISHING HIS SENTENCE, HE HURRIES TO HIS MAPS. HE EMERGES FROM THEM SEVERAL MOMENTS LATER WITH A TRIUMPHANT GLOW THAT WE HAD NEVER SEEN FROM HIM.

"IT'S EXCELLENT NEWS, WE HAVE ONLY GONE OFF COURSE BY A FEW DEGREES...NOW THAT WE HAVE A REFERENCE POINT, WE ARE GOING TO BE ABLE TO CORRECT OUR HEADING AND HEAD STRAIGHT FOR ARMILIA. IF ALL GOES WELL, WE'LL BE THERE IN LESS THAN 48 HOURS."

UPON ARRIVING AT THE LEVEL OF GLA'VER, A NEW SURPRISE AWAITED US: FOUR EXPLORERS WERE HEADING TOWARDS THE TOWER...

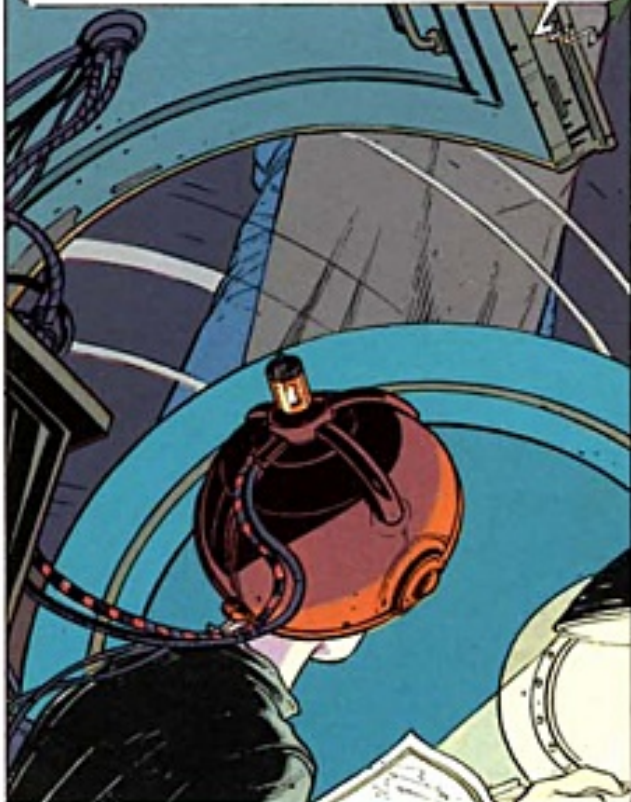
WHO COULD THEY BE? WHAT WERE THEY LOOKING FOR?

MIGHT IT BE, AS THE COMMANDANT SUPPOSES, THE AMUNDSEN EXPEDITION, DEPARTED SOME MONTHS AGO IN SEARCH OF NOBILE AND HIS COMPANIONS? BUT WHY THEN THIS LONG STOP AROUND THE TRIANGLE OF GLASS, WHY THESE SLOW AND CEREMONIOUS GESTURES WHICH MAKE YOU THINK THEY HAVE REACHED THE GOAL OF THEIR JOURNEY?...

ALREADY WE ARE GETTING FAR AWAY FROM THEM AND THE MYSTERY REMAINS COMPLETE.

BUT WHAT...WHAT IS THAT NOISE? QUICK!

WELL, THERE YOU GO! THIS TIME WE'VE GOT YOU.



WILL YOU LOOK AT THAT, HELMUT, JUST LOOK AT THAT! THIS LITTLE TURD HAS DISCONNECTED THE CABLES AND TORN OUT SEVERAL CIRCUITS!

AND WHY DID YOU DO ALL THAT? TO READ? AND YOU'RE SURPRISED THEN THAT PRODUCTION'S DOWN...



AH, THE FILTHY PIS! BOOKS, NOTHING BUT BOOKS...



YOU LOVE THESE BOOKS SO MUCH?



AND DO YOU LIKE THEM LIKE THAT?



MEMOIRS OF AN EXPLORER BY ROALD AMUNDSEN...

TO HELL WITH MEMOIRS AND
EXPLORERS!



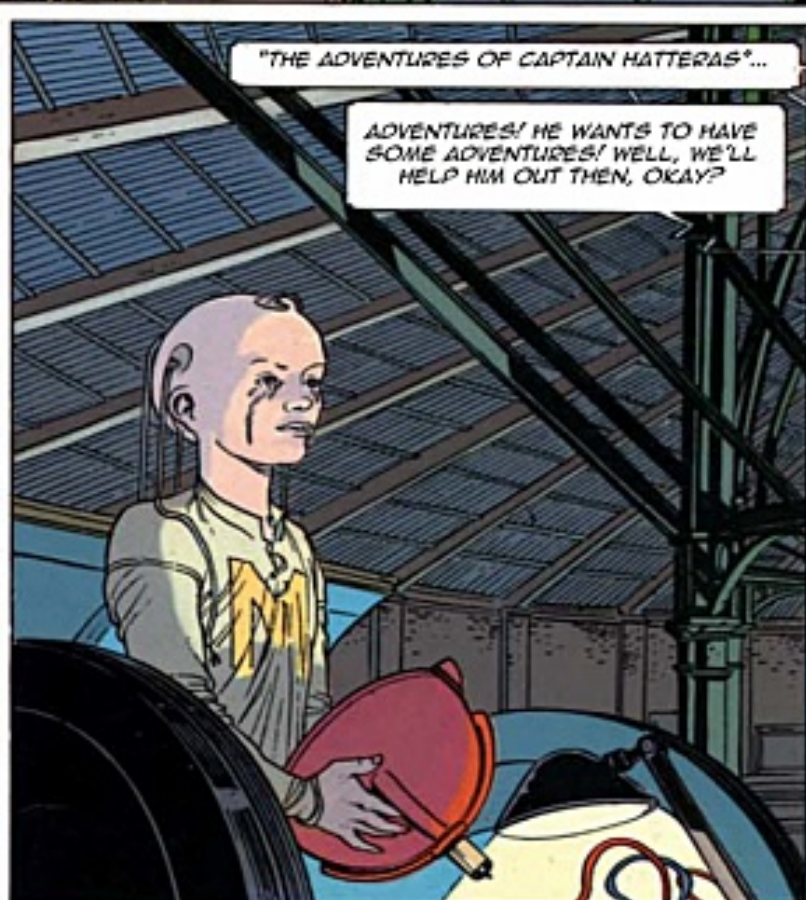
"THE LITTLE SIREN"...

LET IT BURN!



"THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN HATTERAS"...

ADVENTURES! HE WANTS TO HAVE
SOME ADVENTURES! WELL, WE'LL
HELP HIM OUT THEN, OKAY?



"BRUSEL"... "THE DIRIGIBLES"...
"WINTER STORIES"...

TO THINK THAT FOR THESE PIECES OF
TRASH HE TORE UP THIS MACHINE...



AND THAT HE PUT HIS LIFE IN DANGER! BECAUSE HE'LL DIE IF HE STAYS DISCONNECTED FROM THE CONDUITS TOO LONG!

DO YOU UNDERSTAND, THE REST OF YOU? DO YOU HEAR WHAT THE SUPERINTENDENT IS SAYING?

YOU, ANTON, COULD YOU TELL ME THE FIRST OF THE PRECEPTS OF MYLOS?

WE NEED MACHINES LIKE THEY NEED US. IF WE STOP WORKING, THEY STOP AND IF THEY STOP, WE DIE.

THAT'S GOOD, THAT'S GOOD, YOU'RE A GOOD BOY!

AS FOR YOU, FRIEDRICH, THIS TIME YOU'LL BENEFIT FROM OUR MERCY. BUT IF WE EVER CATCH YOU AGAIN, YOU'RE COOKED...

OKAY EVERYBODY, BACK TO WORK! THE INTERRUPTION HAS LASTED TOO LONG. BACK TO WORK, I SAID!



FRIDAY, JUNE 2ND,
HALF PAST NINE IN THE MORNING.

FINALLY...AFTER THESE NEW ORDEALS,
CRUELER THAN THE PRECEDING ONES, I TAKE UP
THESE NOTES THAT I HAD FEARED NEVER BEING
ABLE TO CONTINUE. IT'S USELESS TO RETRACE
THESE PAINFUL MOMENTS: THE LACK OF SLEEP,
THE GLACIAL COLD, THE PRIVATION OF FOOD
CANNOT BE IMAGINED BY THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER
FELT THEM.

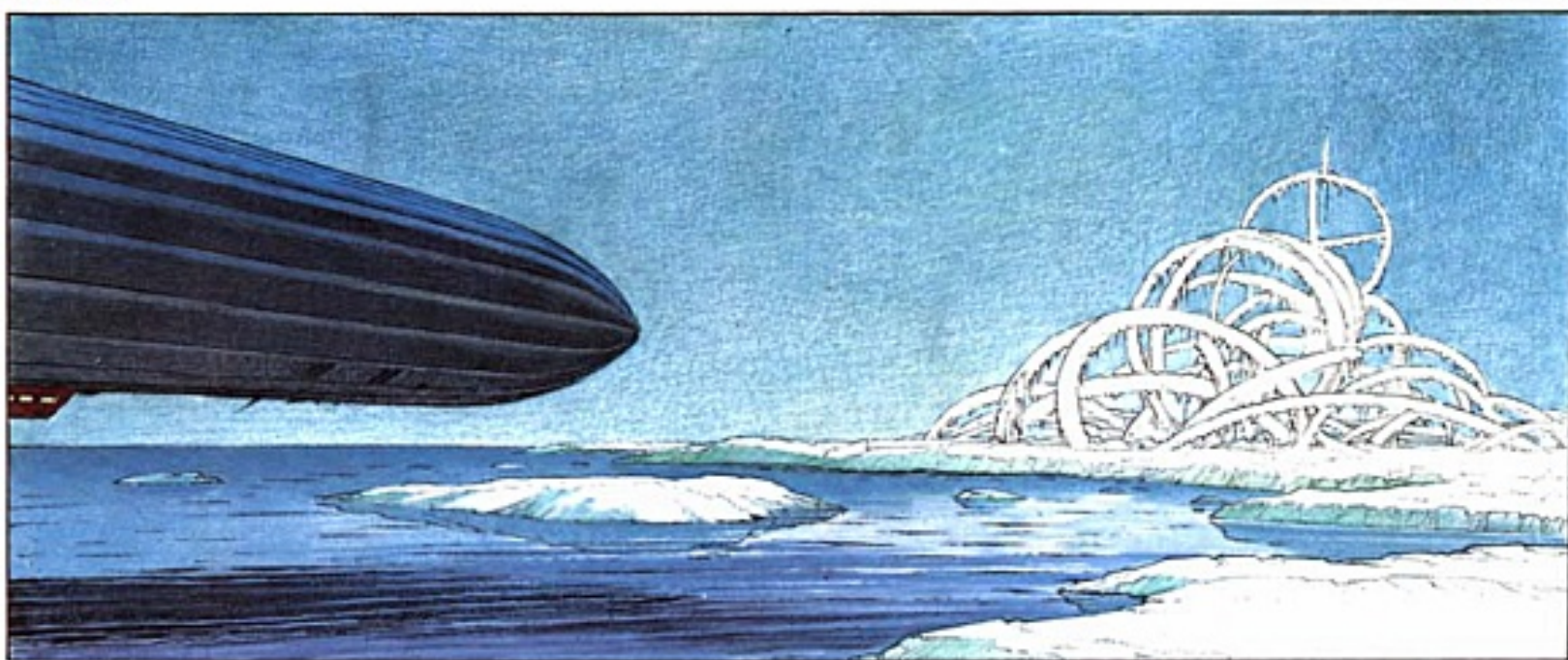
ALL DAY YESTERDAY, ODILON REPEATED THAT
HE HAD SEEN KNIGHTS ON THE ICE FLOES. AS
FOR BRYAN, HE CLAIMED THAT IT WAS A DESERT
THAT WE WERE FLYING OVER AND THAT THE SUN
WAS BLINDING HIM. BILIBINE HIMSELF REMAINED
PROSTRATE FOR LONG MOMENTS, ANSWERING
QUESTIONS ASKED OF HIM ONLY AFTER A DELAY.

THIS MORNING, WITHOUT THE CONDITIONS OF
THE TRIP IMPROVING IN THE LEAST, EACH OF US
SEEMED TO BE DOING BETTER. ALL OF US FEEL
THAT WE ARE SOON GOING TO REACH THE END
AND THIS SENTIMENT GIVES US COURAGE AGAIN.



FRIDAY, JUNE 2ND,
11:05 IN THE MORNING.

AT LAST, ARMILIA IS IN SIGHT. BUT ARE THERE
ANY SURVIVORS THERE? THERE'S A DESOLATE
LANDSCAPE STRETCHING BEFORE US, A CITY
FROZEN BY THE ICE WHICH SEEMS FOREVER DEAD.



FRIDAY, JUNE 2ND.
A QUARTER PAST 2.

WHEN WE DESCENDED FROM THE AIRSHIP, AN OLD MAN HURRIED TOWARDS US. THERE WAS NO QUESTION: IT WAS THIS PYM WHOM MY UNCLE HAD IN GREAT DETAIL DESCRIBED TO ME.

"FERDINAND, AT LAST! I THOUGHT YOU LOST FOR GOOD IN THE TEMPEST...AND I FEARED THAT OUR SITUATION WOULD BECOME EVEN WORSE THAN IT IS...GOD BE PRAISED, YOU ARE HERE!"

"UNFORTUNATELY...", I BEGAN.

BUT HELLA DIDN'T LET ME FINISH MY SENTENCE.

"PUT A LID ON IT, FERDINAND, MISTER PYM IS WAITING FOR THE FORMULA. WHY ARE YOU WAITING TO READ IT TO HIM?"

AND SHE HANDED ME A SLIGHTLY CRUMPLED PAGE: THE LETTER FROM UNCLE ZAHARIUS!

"HELLA, WHAT...? ARE YOU GOING TO EXPLAIN TO ME...?"

"LATER, LATER! GO ON, GO AHEAD, OPEN IT!"

OLD PYM WAS LOOKING AT BOTH OF US WITHOUT ENTIRELY UNDERSTANDING WHAT WAS GOING ON. TREMBLING, I UNFOLDED THE LETTER AND ANNOUNCED IN A CLEAR VOICE:

"PLACE SINISTER QUINTUS, AS NOON THE LEVER, GIVE SPRING TURN!"

FOR A MOMENT, OLD PYM REMAINED SILENT, A DOUBTFUL POULT ON HIS LIPS.

"PLACE SINISTER QUINTUS, THE LEVER AT NOON... A THOUSAND PENDULUMS, IT'S SIMPLE! ONE MOMENT, I'LL BE BACK..."

HE HAD ALREADY DISAPPEARED INTO THE HEART OF THE MACHINE. SOON WE HEARD A MUFFLED BELL, THEN NOISES OF MOTORS THAT WERE BEGINNING TO START UP. IN AN IMMENSE BOILING, THE ICE BEGAN TO MELT...





WHEN THE OLD MAN CAME BACK TO US, THE LANDSCAPE HAD CHANGED COMPLETELY. ARMILIA HAD ALREADY BEGUN TO COME BACK TO LIFE.

PYM HIMSELF SEEMED TRANSFORMED; HIS EYES WERE GLEAMING WITH A SINGULAR FLASH AND A MISCHIEVOUS SMILE WAS SHOWING ITSELF ON HIS LIPS. HE PRESSED OUR HANDS IN HIS FOR A LONG TIME, THEN HE HAD US COME CLOSER TO THE HEART OF THE MECHANISM.

"YOUR UNCLE, FERDINAND, IS AN ADMIRABLE MAN. BECAUSE THE UNINITIATED COULD HAVE NEVER GOTTEN ANYTHING OUT OF THE FORMULA THAT YOU TRANSMITTED TO ME AT PERIL TO YOUR LIFE. BUT FOR ME, AS YOU SAW, EACH OF THESE WORDS TOOK ON A POWERFUL AND DECISIVE SENSE..." "QUINTUS," IS OF COURSE THE FIFTH HOUR OF THE DAY AND "SINISTER," AS THOUGH YOU DIDN'T ALREADY KNOW, IS LEFT. BY ALL EVIDENCE, IT WAS NECESSARY TO PLACE THE HAND OF THE LEFT DIAL, THE ONE THAT YOU SEE THERE, AT THE HEIGHT OF THE NUMBER FIVE. THIS "LEVER" WHICH HAD TO BE ADJUSTED AT NOON IS THE NAME OF THE PIECE WHICH SUPPORTS THEN RELEASES A CLOCKWORK MECHANISM; IT'S THE BASIS OF THIS ADMIRABLE INVENTION, THE KEYSTONE OF OUR ART: THE ESCAPEMENT...THE REST COMES FROM THE SOURCE: BECAUSE THE HAIR "SPRING", YOU SEE, IS THIS PIECE IN THE FORM OF A SPIRAL WHICH REGULATES THE ALARM! BUT I'M BORING YOU WITH ALL THESE DETAILS...YOU MUST BE DYING OF HUNGER...COME, LET'S SIGNAL YOUR FRIENDS TO REJOIN US!"





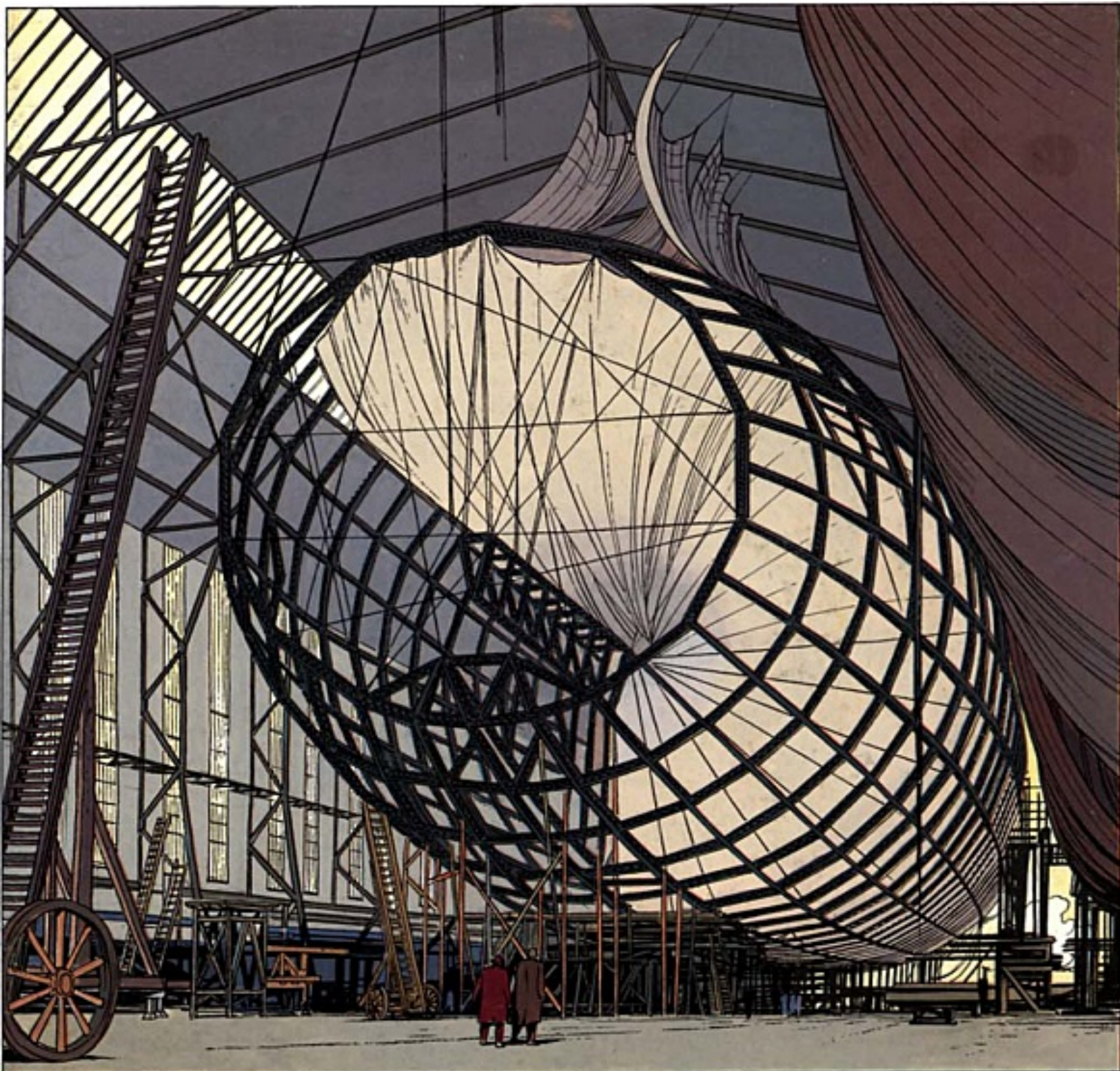
AH YOU WERE INCREDIBLE, HELMUT, REALLY INCREDIBLE, BELIEVE ME, THOSE LITTLE PIGS WILL REMEMBER.



I DID WHAT HAD TO BE DONE, NOTHING MORE...A CLEAR RULE, A PRECISE EXAMPLE FROM TIME TO TIME! NOTHING LIKE THAT TO KEEP THINGS GOING!



LOOK, THERE THE WORK IS! IT'S WELL WORTH SOME SACRIFICES, ISN'T IT?



DON'T WORRY, HELMUT! WE'LL BE READY
WITHIN THE TIME LIMITS, YOU HAVE MY WORD
ON IT.



AFTER A MOMENT, TWELVE MEN SURGED OUT OF THE DEPTHS OF ARMILIA, CARRYING MARVELOUS FOODSTUFFS AND UNKNOWN MACHINES. HARDLY HAD WE FINISHED OUR LUNCH THAT THEY ANNOUNCED TO US THAT THE AIRSHIP WAS AGAIN READY FOR DEPARTURE, SUFFICIENTLY STOCKED WITH SUPPLIES AND GAS TO FACE THE RETURN TRIP.

ALREADY OLD PYM HAD STOOD UP AGAIN. "MY FRIENDS," HE DECLARED, "WE'LL HAVE TO BID EACH OTHER ADIEU. ARMILIA IS UP AND RUNNING AGAIN. THIS SPHERE MUST WITHOUT DELAY REJOIN ITS TRUE PLACE AND BEGIN ITS OPERATIONS AGAIN. FROM NOW ON, EVERY MINUTE COUNTS."

WHEN THE ZEPPELIN HAD STARTED TO CLIMB, THE VISIBLE PART OF THE MECHANISM WAS ALREADY SINKING INTO THE OCEAN DEPTHS. AFTER SEVERAL MINUTES, THERE REMAINED NO OTHER TRACE OF ARMILIA THAN SOME STIRRINGS ON THE SURFACE OF THE WATER...

"WELL, HELLA," I SAID WITH A GRAVE AIR, "WILL YOU FINALLY TELL ME WHERE YOU PULLED THAT ENVELOPE FROM?"

"NOTHING MORE SIMPLE...WHEN WE WENT INTO THE FUSELAGE TO LOOK FOR IT, I SPIED IT RIGHT AWAY AND I PUT MY FOOT ON IT. YOU WERE SO SURE OF YOURSELF, SO CERTAIN THAT YOU ALONE COULD SAVE ARMILIA...I COULDN'T RESIST THE PLEASURE OF THIS LITTLE JOKE.

I WAS GOING TO PROTEST VIGOROUSLY WHEN SHE INTERJECTED THESE WORDS THAT ALLOWED NO REPLY:

"QUIT THIS SINISTER PLACE! LEAVE SOON AND GIVE SPRING A TURN!"

